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A WOMAN'S WAY

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"OH, THAT TIE!"
SHE EXCLAIMED

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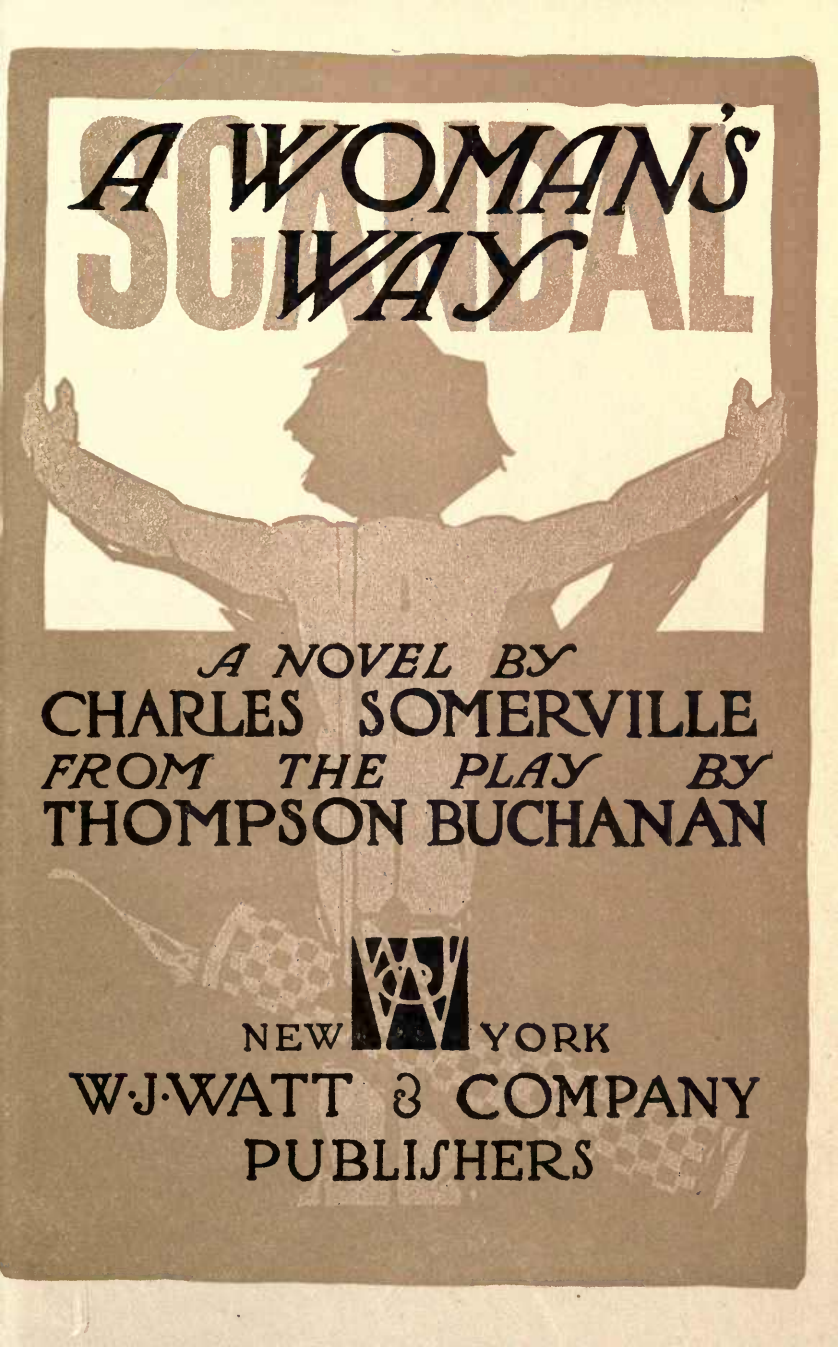

A WOMAN'S WAY

A NOVEL BY
CHARLES SOMERVILLE
FROM THE PLAY BY
THOMPSON BUCHANAN

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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE BESIEGED

UPPER Fifth Avenue, that section above and beyond the realm of shops and where modern mansions look out only upon the trimmed and clustering foliage of Central Park; remains aristocratically asleep in the early morning hours. Heavy-eyed servants here and there polishing the brass or bronze work of the massive portals furnish desultory signs of human activity. More than this, there is only the sharp twitter of the sparrows in the park trees. The blinds of the windows in the big houses are all down, suggesting the closed eyes of their inhabitants and the great avenue of the rich stretches smooth and silent for a mile or more along the grey park wall.

It became remarkable therefore that in front of the Stanton mansion on this morning there should have assembled a group of men nearly numbering into the proportions of a crowd. Singly and in pairs they had been arriving — the first of them as early as six o'clock, the others came at intervals until about seven o'clock. Two of the latest arrivals had dashed up in taxicabs. One got there in a hansom, but most of them had come afoot. They were evidently all acquainted with one another. Nods, grins and spoken salutations had met every newcomer and a general grin from the group had followed each new arrival as, after a short chat, he mounted the broad stone stairway and pushed energetically at the ivory bell button in its bronze frame. Occasionally, the caller would have to push the button five or six times before gaining a response. In each case the final result was the same. The inner door would be slowly, almost stealthily opened and only for a few inches. From the street one might catch a glimpse of the heavy, pale face of Stanton's butler. It always wore a frown. The talk would be short and always with the butler's heavy head wagging decisively in a surly negative and then

the other man, sometimes with a muttered imprecation, sometimes with a smile or again with a shrug of the shoulders would descend the steps and join the little crowd below.

It was a restless group and noticeably its members were all young men, eager, wide-awake, alert despite the early hour of the day. Four of them carried large cameras, whose mechanism they tested from time to time. Each had photographed the Stanton mansion.

After the last man had arrived and, like the others, been rebuffed at the door, there had been no departures. They all stayed on.

It was their duty to do so. For this little crowd of young men formed the advance line of the press — the skirmishers who had been sent out to the siege of the citadel wherein lay, what the city editors — their commanders — regarded as the "big story of the day." Customarily the young men of their commands — the staffs of the evening newspapers did not report until seven o'clock in the morning. But each of them was required to have a telephone somewhere near his bedside in order that, quite like a fireman or policeman, a jingling call of the bell could bring him bounding out of bed

to face an emergency in the inexorably and imperatively swift game of news-gathering. On this occasion, these signals had rung the scouts of the press up as early as five o'clock. The clipped, curt instructions from city editors had been very much alike.

Cottrell of the *Evening Journal*, for instance, had spoken to his man, Markfield, as follows, patting his free hand decisively on his desk beside the telephone as he spoke, which was a habit he had when he was very much in earnest:

"Hello, Markfield, sorry to rouse you out — but it's important — big stuff. The morning papers have only a smell of it. Biggest society sensation in years. And we must get the goods on it. I'll send Ironson up with his camera and Pinover and Crawford up to help you. And go to it for all you're worth.

"Listen:

"Stanton — Howard Stanton — yes — that's right, son of the multi-millionaire; married only a little while ago — yes; that's right, married General Livingston's daughter — newly rich and old, blue-blood combination. Know where they live in Fifth Avenue? Good. This is what has happened. Stanton smashed his auto last

night, a little out of New Haven. Dinner; wine and all that. Got too gay with the speed. I've got Bangs and a photographer up there at the scene of the accident now. Yes; Stanton's hurt, but not much. That isn't the story, though. Stanton had a swell girl in the auto with him. She got hurt, too. And it wasn't his wife! *Now* are you wise? Stanton was taken to his home. And the woman was taken away in another auto — to her home. Don't know who she is. But Stanton's been leading the gay life for some time now. Seldom seen with his wife, and there's going to be something doing when young Mrs. Stanton finds out — and the old General, too. He'll probably die of apoplexy, or shoot Stanton. He's the proudest old fire-eating aristocrat in the town. So get on the job. Make Stanton talk. He's got to. He's got to make some bluff at an explanation. And do your blamedest to identify the woman who was with him. But, at the same time, Markfield, don't let enthusiasm run away with your judgment. It's a delicate case and be mighty sure of your facts. There'll be a million-dollar libel suit back of any slip-up. But go to it. Stanton's got to talk. He's

got to say something. And try for Mrs. Stanton. She may be so indignant that she'll hand out some hot stuff. Maybe she's sent for her lawyer. Watch out for that. All right. Don't fail to get me on the 'phone and give me the lay of the land inside of an hour. Goodbye."

Similar talks from equally anxious city editors had massed the small band of alert reporters at the Stanton mansion. But all had met the same imperturbable wall of opposition in the person of the Stanton butler.

"Mr. Stanton won't see no reporters. Mrs. Stanton won't neither. Hi cawn't take your card in, sir. It's me orders. Now, that's h'all, sir. I cawn't do it. No use to talk more, sir."

And the butler had slowly but firmly shut the door in every case. Even when Gallegher of the *World* had deliberately thrust his foot inside the door to prevent the closing of the barrier, the butler had only applied extra vigor to the hand he had on the knob as he said indignantly:

"No use of your trying that sort of thing, sir. I 'as me orders. Nothink will be said by nobody to nobody, sir."

Gallegher having relieved his feelings by calling the butler a " pie-faced mut of a flunkey," joined his companions in council. The council decided that the only thing to do was to play a waiting game — to camp outside the house and see who came out of it or who entered. They discussed the possibility of Mrs. Stanton "going home to her mother " that very morning and of the chances of her giving out a statement when she went. Or perhaps old General Livingston would be along with his indignation aflame and a revolver, or a horse-whip for Howard Stanton. Or the lawyers might be called on.

At this juncture that happened which caused the young men of the press no little satisfaction. The silent street suddenly resounded with the cries of " Yuxtra — Yuxtra." There was a duet — the shrill pipe of a skinny boy mingled with the hoarse cry of a red-faced man. The early editions of the *Journal* and *World* flaunted from their arms. And as they passed the Stanton house a maid servant appeared from the basement at the same time that the heavy butler appeared on the steps above. Both bought copies of newspapers, conducting the transaction

hastily, not waiting for the pennies in change, but swiftly withdrawing into the house the instant the papers were in their hands.

Gallegher grinned.

"That's pretty good," he said. "A set of papers for Stanton and," he added significantly, "a set for Mrs. Stanton."

He gazed at the drawn curtains of the mansion.

"Looks as peaceful as a church," he commented. "But I'll bet there are some household sky-rockets going off in there now — or will be as soon as little Mrs. Stanton has read those head-lines."

"I guess that's no lie," said a gray-eyed, curly-haired, slender reporter. "After all," he went on, dropping the jocular, impersonal cynical tone which reporters adopt in discussng the tragedies as well as the comedies of life which come under their observation, "after all, it's kind of too bad. I covered their wedding, you know. She was one of the prettiest, sweetest little brides you ever saw — had the dandiest little smile and carried herself like a thoroughbred. And she is. The Livingstons are some class — there's no getting around that. And

young Stanton certainly filled in the picture just right — tall, straight, clear-skinned and just awkward enough to be all right. They were certainly as fine looking a couple as I ever saw step up. I'm sorry that little lady has got the worst of it. Wonder who the other one is? Wonder if she's got a hubby? Maybe this isn't the only house where domestic sky-rockets are popping."

CHAPTER II

WITHIN THE CITADEL

MR. GALLEGHER'S surmise of flaring "sky-rockets of domestic dissension" within the Stanton house was not at this moment correct. Silence was absolute in all the rooms. The servants walked softly and talked softly. Young Mrs. Stanton was, as far as anyone knew, fast asleep in her own blue and white bed-chamber.

Stanton, whose injured arm and outraged conscience had both continued twinging since his arrival home very late in the night, had not slept at all. He had aroused his valet, secured the refreshment of a bath and a change of clothing, received a hurried visit from the family physician and then, in guilty restlessness sought a big chair in the library. Uneasily, yet almost involuntarily, such was his natural state of anxiety, he had sent for the morning newspapers. In them he had found the headlines recording the

accident very prominently, but the details were meagre. None had identified his companion of the disastrous ride. And this was, at any rate, a solid rock of comfort in a sea of trouble. He had gone over the sheets feverishly, tossing them heedlessly aside so that they littered his knees and his feet. Suddenly his eyes drooped heavily. The healthy reaction from shock and nervousness had come. He threw his head back in the big leather chair, drew a newspaper over his face and sank into slumber. But it was not unbroken. Every little while his body started and twitched as the sharp rattle of the door gong struck upon his ears. These were the volleys the reporters aimed in their efforts to invade the citadel wherein for them, lay the treasure of the day's "big story."

Nor was this the only method of attack. Volleys were being fired at long distance. Every few seconds the telephone on the little table in the corner of the library buzzed with angry insistence. Overwrought city editors had young men in the newspaper offices at the other ends of the wires keeping up a clamor for information.

Grave, fat, but soft of tread, Wilson, the but-

ler, was at the end of his trained official patience.

At the noise of the latest conversation, Stanton moved upright in the chair, the newspaper falling from his countenance. His brow was puckered; his eyes angry.

"Yes, yes," Wilson was saying; "this is Mr. Stanton's. I cawn't speak no louder. Yes; Mr. 'Oward Stanton's. Who is it, you say? Ho! the *Journal*. No, sir; I wish you wouldn't. Why — this is the eighth time you've called this morning. Mr. Stanton will not speak with you."

Wilson put up the receiver emphatically. Stanton fell back in his chair. Both were halted suddenly in their movements by a renewed buzzing of the telephone. Wilson was almost betrayed into making an audible expression of his annoyance, as he made his way back to the instrument with his formal and measured tread.

"Yes, yes," he answered, and then disgustedly, "Ho — the *World*, you say. I don't know, sir — I cawn't say. Automobile accident? I don't know anything about it. Yes — quite — I know you've called nine times this

morning — I know it, sir. I don't know nothing about Mr. Stanton and no other woman. I don't know nothing about Mrs. Stanton. I don't know nothing about nothing." Wilson paused. "No," he added, "he'll not speak with no one."

And Wilson would have moved away, his eyes quite expressionless as they turned in his master's direction, but again the little buzzer rattled the signal of a new invasion. Well-trained servants all have the art of swearing 'way down in their stomachs and Wilson undoubtedly had a diaphragm bulging with profanity as he took up the wire-talk anew.

"Yes — yes. Ho — the *Post*, you say." Wilson's tone grew milder, the *Post* being a newspaper very much as he was a man, heavy, stolid, devoted to the service of the rich. "I cawn't say. I don't know." Wilson's voice rose a pitch higher. "The *Post?*" he demanded suddenly. "It sounds very much like the same voice that called this morning and said it was the *Journal*. Yes, the *Journal!*" Wilson involuntarily fell back "Ho; no, sir," he gasped into the receiver. "Didn't say you was

that! I didn't call you names. *What?* Go to where? Well, I won't go there," declared the butler sturdily; "I say I won't."

He clapped up the receiver with a snap. He was immediately perturbed in his unwonted emotional display, by hearing young Mr. Stanton sharply exclaim:

"Oh — Oh!"

Wilson faced quickly. He saw then that the exclamations were not in anger, but in pain.

"Wilson," demanded young Mr. Stanton, "why wasn't I born with three hands?"

The man's eyes opened widely into something of a startled stare.

"I — I — couldn't say, sir — really."

His youthful master frowned.

"Well — if I'd three hands, I could have used two of them to manage the damned machine," said Stanton illuminatively. "Motoring with women, Wilson, will never be a safe sport until we grow men with three arms."

"Yes, sir," returned the butler affably. "Will you have the papers, sir?"

Stanton shot a glance embracing newspapers on the table, on his knees, covering his feet, scattered all over the floor. He grunted.

"Thought I had 'em all — this side of Chicago," he replied.

"You have the morning newspapers, sir. But the afternoon editions is starting to come out now, sir. Thought you might like to see this, sir."

With something like eagerness beneath his official calm, the butler held forth a copy of the *Evening Journal* — held it with the sheet at full length so that young Mr. Stanton's eyes were vividly filled with a sight of the word "*Divorce*" in ponderous letters of black, stretching across the whole width of the page.

"Very thoughtful of you, Wilson," commented Stanton. But the shade of sarcasm in his tone was lost.

"Yes, sir, thank you, sir," said Wilson amiably.

Stanton took the newspapers in his hands. He contemplated the head-lines anew. He shivered.

"You've read that?" he demanded.

"I — saw — saw the head-lines, sir."

Stanton shrugged the shoulders of his green-plaid dressing gown.

"In that case," he said, "I couldn't deprive

you of the rest of it, Wilson. Read it aloud to me."

The hand that gave over the paper perceptibly trembled.

Wilson was slow to take the paper.

"Yes, sir," he said confusedly. But he braced and the huge head-line lost none of its sensational effectiveness when he brought it out.

"*Divorce*," he read with declamatory force.

"Yes —"

"*Divorce*," repeated Wilson.

"You've read that once," cut in Stanton.

"Yes, sir, but it's here twice, sir."

"Oh."

"Yes, sir; thank you sir. DIVORCE — in Smart Set to Follow Sensational Automobile Accident. Wronged Wife Hurries to Injured Husband —." Wilson, almost lost in the enthusiasm of his rendering, suddenly paused. "It says just that, sir," he parenthesized.

"I don't doubt it, Wilson."

Stanton's tone was so matter of fact that Wilson took up the reading with new gusto.

"*Who* is the other woman," he uttered with dramatic accusatory force.

Stanton half sprung out of his chair.

HELD IT SO THAT YOUNG MR. STANTON'S EYES WERE VIVIDLY FILLED WITH A SIGHT OF THE WORD "DIVORCE"

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"What?" he demanded.

"It says that here, sir," said Wilson hastily.

Stanton subsided. He looked Wilson fully in the eye.

"Yes — yes — I see," he observed, "but don't read it as though you enjoyed it so damned much."

"Yes, sir."

Thus admonished, Wilson's unction faded from his tones. He read that which followed in the newspaper without elocutionary zest.

"That a sensational divorce suit in the smart set will follow the mysterious automobile accident in which a gay, young millionaire was dangerously injured and an unknown beautiful young woman miraculously escaped death was learned on good authority to-day by a reporter for this paper."

Stanton's calm broke.

"Good authority — bah!" he cried.

"Yes, sir," returned Wilson, confirmatorily and continued. "Although every effort is being made to shroud the affair in mystery and withhold the identity of the young millionaire and his fair companion it was definitely established by the *Evening Journal* that the wrecked car be-

longed to Howard Stanton, the young millionaire whose sensational escapades have more than once brought him into public notice."

"See here, Wilson — are you reading that right?"

"Yes, sir."

Young Stanton fell back again in his chair. "At the home of Mr. Stanton all information was denied. Mrs. Stanton —"

Howard Stanton got up suddenly. The goad was intolerable.

"That will do, Wilson — er — well, they really don't know any more than I do — don't see, Wilson, what use there was in buying the damned paper."

Wilson hastily placed the sheet on the table with the air of reducing some obstreperous thing to quietude.

"Anything else, sir?"

Stanton paused. When he began to speak, he meant that his tone should be casual but in this he hardly succeeded as he asked:

"Anyone call *me* on the phone?"

"Yes sir — *Journal* five times; *World* nine times; *Sun, Globe* five times; *Mail, Telegram,*

Staats-Zeitung, one time. I told them you were out, sir."

"Is that all? You forgot the *Herald*, *Times* and *Telegraph*."

"They" replied the butler, "are morning papers, sir. It isn't time for them yet."

"Excuse me, Wilson," said Stanton humbly.

"Yes, sir, but," he added, "police headquarters and the Coroner's office called."

Stanton, his hands thrust into the pocket of his dressing gown, wheeled about and stood rigidly and stared at the butler.

"What?" he demanded. "The Coroner's office?"

"Yes, sir. They wanted to know if there was any truth in the report that Mrs. Stanton had attempted suicide when she heard the story."

"This is infamous."

"Yes, sir — but it was the same voice that called eight times before, sir."

As if telepathically, the 'phone buzzed anew.

"Take that receiver down and don't answer that 'phone if the devil himself calls in person," commanded young Mr. Stanton.

"Yes, sir. Anything else, sir?"

"Anyone been here to see me?"

"A crowd of young men in front ever since last night and early this morning, sir. I think they are newspaper men."

Stanton tightened his lips.

"See if they are still there."

"Yes, sir."

Wilson moved to a front window. He drew back the curtains. He peered forth as cautiously.

"They are there, sir."

"All of them?"

"Yes, sir." And for further comfort he added. "And some more, sir. And one — two — three — four — five — six — seven — seven photographers, sir."

Suddenly Wilson was betrayed into a wild, backward leap from the window.

"What's the matter?" asked Stanton in the surprise of Wilson's unwonted agility.

"O, they've taken my picture, sir."

Stanton grinned.

"Well, that's all right, *your picture*," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Anything more? Look again."

A big game hunter parting the foilage of a jungle where he anticipated the discovery of a tigress and her cubs, could not have exercised greater caution than did Wilson as he drew back the curtains and applied his eye to the tiniest possible aperture through which he could gaze.

"Well?" asked Stanton.

"Three cabs and a motor car — just drove up — more newspapermen, sir. They are waiting for you — expecting you to come out, sir."

Stanton looked startled. Then he smiled.

"They'd better take a lease," he observed.

"Yes, sir."

Then Wilson did an extraordinary thing — for him. He laughed outright, spontaneously.

"O," he said, "I beg pardon, sir."

"Well,— what is it?"

Stanton started for the window himself but just as he was about to stare out, he recollected the circumstances and the threatening camera eyes without and drew swiftly back.

"What's the matter — you, idiot?" he cried at the butler.

Wilson's face was again absolutely grave.

"It's Mr. Morris, sir. He just drove up in a

hansom. They are taking his picture, sir."

The laugh that the sight had drawn out of Wilson, was now duplicated by his master.

"Fine!" grinned Stanton gleefully. He tried himself to look without being seen. "What are they doing, Wilson?"

"They are all of them trying to talk to him at once. He seems a bit agitated, sir. He's shaking his cane, sir, and they are taking his picture and — and," concluded the horrified Wilson, "a laughing at him, sir!"

The butler's word painting of the quandary of Mr. Morris — Ned Morris — Stanton's portly, pretentious brother-in-law; apostle of rigid social conventionality, of much self-conscious dignity that was in his profession of the law and because of his advantageous social connection complimentarily taken to indicate inherent gravity and sagacity; Morris whose code of conduct was as nicely and evenly trimmed as his brown mustache; whose nature was all fatousness where Stanton's so easily stirred toward the farcical, made the young millionaire chuckle aloud in the face of Wilson, and made him laugh anew when a frantic ringing of the door bell betokened that his ponderous and pseudo-profound

relation was most urgently seeking escape from his predicament. Young Stanton lost sight of himself in the matter completely. At a renewed ringing of the bell, he slapped his knee and said.

"Go it, Ned!"

"Yes, sir," said Wilson by force of habit.

"I think he must want to come in, Wilson," grinned Stanton.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, then show him in, you idiot!"

"Yes, sir."

"Wilson," yelled Stanton as the butler passed into the hallway.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't let any of those reporters in."

"No, sir. But the last time I had to open the front door one of them put his foot inside the edge and I had to squeeze it. I am afraid I hurt him, sir."

"Hurt him," retorted Stanton indignantly. "Kill him!"

"Yes, sir," said Wilson formally.

Young Stanton swept the room at a glance but his smiling eyes rested on nothing in particular.

"Ned of all people!" he cried. "Great!"

CHAPTER III

MR. MORRIS TAKES CHARGE

THE excitement that had raised an apoplectic flush to the face of Mr. Edward Morris must have been great indeed for the punctilious gentlemen forgot to hand his hat and stick to the butler but instead entered with that glossy, high headgear pushed back from his reddened brow and his walking stick waved wildly. His white waistcoat about a girth showing first signs of rotundity, was rumpled. His breath was coming shortly and above all his usually steady and even stolid eyes were roving wildly and with indignation.

Stanton's own frank eyes grew merrier. He did not try to hide his smile.

"Did they take your picture that way, old boy?" he asked with a contemplatively moving glance.

"Now see here, Howard," blurted Morris at this further sting to his fondly nurtured dig-

nity. "This is no laughing matter." The lawyer paused until his breath came more freely. "Disgracing your family — disgracing *me!*"

Stanton raised his eye-brows.

"Wait a minute — wait a minute." said he. "Will you kindly tell me, Ned — where do you come in?"

Pompously and angrily Morris replied:

"I — am your sister's husband."

"O, well," said Stanton with a short wave of the hand, "any girl is likely to make a mistake. Don't be sore on *her* for that."

"Sir," began Morris and then dropping his regulation legal tone, he supplemented: "What?"

Stanton again waved his hand, more smoothly, blandly than before.

"Suppose you weren't my sister's husband — what then? Couple of thousand a year for you — maybe — maybe not. As it is — nice house; fair girl — good clothes, great grub, wonderful brother-in-law and manage the property and — and even have your picture taken for nothing. You are not in so awful bad —"

"Look here, Howard," declared Morris

quickly. "I came up here to help get you out of this scrape."

Stanton did not repulse the desire for conciliation manifested.

"I know you did," he said nicely. "I just wanted to get it out of your head that you were doing me a favor. Its a part of your job — brother-in-law — to do what you are doing. That's why I plugged so hard for you with Belle. Thought it was cheaper giving you her share than paying you all mine to keep me out of trouble." Stanton laughed. "Oh — I'm a business man," he concluded.

"Yes," retorted Morris. "This looks like it."

From the breast of his coat he drew forth, unfolded and displayed at full length another edition of the *Journal*. There was something in the way of an addition to the first headline. The type was as big. "*Divorce*" loomed forth in the big black letters but above it in type as large flared in crimson the startling word "*Scandal.*"

Stanton fell back.

"Good gracious! Another!" he gasped. He walked to the table and took up the other

" extra." He put them side by side, "Divorce " staring at him twice from the papers.

" What is it? " asked Morris anxiously.

" This ' Divorce ' is a pretty good forecast," answered Stanton. He was no longer laughing.

" Good heavens, man," questioned his brother-in-law, " you don't mean that Marion and you have separated? "

" Don't try to throw that front, Ned," was Stanton's impatient retort. " You know as well as I know — as well as Marion knows — that she and I have been separated for months —"

" But she's been living here."

" Yes." The young man shrugged his shoulders. " Good house for entertaining and its her's anyhow." He grimaced. " We've been almost as intimate," he said, " as two people who do not talk the same language."

" What's wrong? "

Stanton walked over to the library table and stood a few seconds tapping it with knuckles.

" I don't know," he said finally. " Too much money, I guess. Marion's a splendid girl, Ned. Finest in the world." He said it very earnestly.

"She likes me in a way but —" Stanton again took up one of the newspapers, glanced at the headline and put it down again. "Hang it, Ned," he concluded suddenly, "there ought to be a law preventing kids marrying until they know their own minds."

"Humph," cried Morris, his composure and dignity somewhat regained. "You two kicked up a jolly row till you'd fixed it."

The portly lawyer was shocked to hear from Stanton an outburst of irresponsible laughter.

"By George!" exclaimed the handsome young chap, "I can see those headlines now — "Lochinvar Outdone! — Yale Athlete Carries Off Vassar Girl in Motor." Stanton paused. "Gee, she did look good that night," he ended with enthusiasm.

"She looks just as good now," observed Morris with an elder brother air of admonishment. "Rather better."

Stanton's enthusiasm dropped.

"Er — yes," he said with indifference.

"Can't it be fixed, old boy?" asked Morris and there was genuine kindliness in his voice.

Stanton looked directly at Morris. There was clearly wistfulness in his tones as he said:

"There's no record of any fellow dreaming the same dream twice, and you know it, my dear Ned. When you wake up, you wake up and when you go to sleep again, it's another dream."

"Then I take it," observed Morris in his heavy fashion, "you and Marion have waked up?"

Stanton answered with the same depth and sincerity with which he had spoken before.

"It might have been all right with a little place in the country and a couple of kids; but dad's money and Marion's health killed that. Then she went in for society and culture on the side."

Morris permitted himself the indulgence of a cold smile.

"And you for sports and the chorus on the side."

"Oh, cut that preach thing," said Stanton sharply.

"Well, all I can say is," pursued Morris, "it's a damned shame it didn't stick. You are both thoroughbreds."

"Now you've hit it, Ned. Thoroughbreds don't do for double harness and every time

there's a kicking match I've been the one kicked."

The young husband flung himself despondently into the big chair.

"Don't see really what I was born for," he muttered, "unless it was to give these newspaper chaps something to do."

Morris also took a chair.

"This latest?" he inquired. "You and a young woman being injured is — is true?"

"Absolutely."

"In that case," declared the society man and lawyer, "it must be denied at once."

Stanton smiled cordially.

"I knew I did right to persuade Belle to take you." And when Morris looked sourly on the jest, he added, "It wasn't an easy task either."

Morris impatiently took up the original thread.

"The woman will keep quiet?"

"She's not exactly proud of it, you know."

"But if she's in the chorus?"

"She isn't."

"Manicure or milliner?"

"Neither."

Morris slowly slapped his knee with a soft palm.

"Good. Then we'll tell Marion it isn't true."

"What? Lie to Marion?" The young fellow shook his head decisively. "Certainly not. I may be a fool but I'm a gentleman."

But Morris did not lose his air of superior wisdom.

"Something must be done," he said. "You must do something with Marion. How will *she* take it?"

Stanton showed his palms.

"You never can tell how Marion will take anything. She's as proud as a peacock and as game as a pebble."

"She'd never show it if she were hurt," assented Mr. Morris.

"We've simply been drifting till now," confided Stanton.

"With no distinct break," asked the attorney.

"Drifting, you know,— a row and then quiet."

"Then who is this — this —"

"She is a lady, Ned," said the young millionaire quickly and firmly. "And," he nodded

his head, "as she is likely to become a close relative of yours — you had better treat her with respect. For the present all you need know is that the accident *did* occur and *she* is a lady."

The lawyer got up. He sneered openly.

"What?" he demanded.

"Don't you suppose I am going to protect the reputation of my future wife?" Stanton retorted grandiloquently. "A lady can ride in an automobile you know."

"See here Howard — are you crazy or am I?"

Morris clasped his hands behind his back and looked searchingly at his brother-in-law. His own opinion in the matter was thus plainly conveyed.

"I'll match you," was the younger man's tart rejoinder.

The grave Wilson, salver in hand, now stood in the doorway.

"A note for Mr. Morris, sir — marked urgent, sir — delivered by messenger."

Presently the lawyer looked up from the letter.

"From those men outside," he said. "Want a statement —"

"Well, I'm getting good and tired of this," cried Stanton. "Wilson, tell 'em all to go to hell!"

"Yes, sir."

But Morris raised his plump and heavy hand. He lowered his head and in his most grave manner, advised:

"No — no. Wait a minute. I have an idea." He stepped slowly over toward the butler. "Wilson tell them if they will go away I will give them a statement later."

The butler looked toward his youthful employer. He received a nod of acquiescence.

"Well, now what, Ned?" said Stanton without show of confidence.

"Let me think," ruminated the lawyer. "Oh — I have an idea — an emphatic denial — with a gentle threat of libel."

"Cut out the 'gentle.'"

"Trust me."

The butler reappeared.

"Yes, Wilson?" questioned Stanton.

"Beg pardon, sir, but the newspaper-men

said they are waiting for Mrs. Stanton to leave your house for her father's and they hoped she would go soon, if convenient, for they had another edition in forty minutes."

Stanton's nonchalance evaporated.

"Such impertinence is beyond bearing! This whole country is being governed by a lot of irresponsibles, hiding behind the public opinion they make by lying to and fooling the people through the papers. I won't stand it! What business have they to pry into my personal affairs? I won't stand it, I tell you! Which one sent that message, Wilson?" The husband started toward the door. "I'll thrash him!"

Once more Morris' fat hand of council was put forth.

"Yes; and have the rest of them take pictures while you do it. And then be hauled to a police court and fined by a Magistrate who is afraid of them." Morris' fat hand patted Stanton's shoulder.

"Now — now, Howard, be calm," he said. "Leave it to me."

"But I tell you —" stormed the younger man.

"I am your lawyer," rejoined Morris impressively.

"Very well, all right." The young man's clenched hands relaxed.

Slowly the other pointed to a doorway leading to a music room.

"You go in there, and, Wilson, say to the newspapermen that Mr. Morris will see one — to represent them all."

"Yes, sir."

"Make it strong, Ned," urged Stanton before disappearing into the other room.

All Morris' four-ply dignity had now settled upon him.

"Howard," said he, "you wait in there and leave the matter to me."

CHAPTER IV

THE FORGOTTEN GLOVES

IN response to the message that the planning Mr. Morris sent out by Wilson to the newspaper reporters, the butler ushered into the room the slender, curly-haired, gray-eyed reporter who, earlier in the morning, had recounted his recollection of the wedding of Marion Livingston to Howard Stanton. The young man was altogether at ease — as professional in his manner as a physician might have been in answering a summons. Yet he was neither brusque nor assertive. His intelligent eye plainly made a rapid mental picture of the room — a quick appraisement for descriptive purposes, later. His equally quick appraisement in a glance of the person of Mr. Morris might have been delicately cynical but his nod was agreeable and his smile tactful.

"Mr. Lynch" announced Wilson curtly. The legal representative of the Stanton family

sought unsuccessfully not to show how fully he realized the consideration he was bestowing on this young man — general agent, of the invaders without.

"I am Mr. Morris, Mr. Stanton's attorney," he said.

"Oh, I recognize you, Mr. Morris," said the reporter, "we know most of the big lawyers, you know," he finished, smiling pleasantly.

And Mr. Morris was betrayed into smiling quite as pleasantly in return. He experienced a gentle glow and said;

"Ah — won't you sit down, Mr. Lynch?"

"Thank you," said the young man and walked to a chair near the library table.

"From the *Journal* or *World?*"

Mr. Lynch smiled again.

"Neither," he said. "They wouldn't trust each other."

"Oh," Mr. Morris looked almost amiable. "From the *Post?*"

Mr. Lynch's smiled lingered.

"Wrong again, Mr. Morris. This story only broke last night. The *Post* probably hasn't heard of it yet. I'm from the *City News.*

That is an organization that serves all the newspapers."

The planning Mr. Morris had evidently determined that the captivation of Mr. Lynch's favor was highly desirable. His manner was even genial as he laid back and smiled broadly and with an out-stretched hand, exclaimed:

"Well, then — Mr. Lynch, or the *City News* — what can I do for you?"

"Why — you know the story, Mr. Morris. Is it true?"

"I know certain facts, Mr. Lynch," came the guarded reply. "I must confess," he went on in lighter tone, "that I do not keep abreast of the romances in our yellow journals. When I undertake fiction, I choose a more enduring kind."

"The story is," replied Lynch quickly, "that a wrecked automobile was found in a ditch beside the road just outside of New Haven, Connecticut. When the car passed through New Haven it had in it a young man who answers the description of Mr. Stanton and — a young woman who does *not* answer the description of Mrs. Stanton. They were found with the wrecked car, unconscious, and carried away by

persons in another automobile. It is rumored that the woman is desperately injured and the man fatally hurt. The car belonged to Mr. Howard Stanton and Dr. Ball was here at the house at a very early hour this morning — and a young woman who does answer the description of Mrs. Stanton arrived — in great haste, last night at this house."

The tips of Mr. Morris' fingers met one another.

"I cannot say really, Mr. Lynch, whether the story is true or not."

"You do not care to make a statement?"

"Oh — yes; I'll make a statement," declared Mr. Morris.

"Well?" asked the reporter quickly, unwilling to allow his quarry the defense of deliberativeness.

"This car of which you speak may or may not have been Mr. Stanton's," said the lawyer, evenly. "I cannot say. The man in the car, however, was certainly not Mr. Stanton. And the woman was certainly not Mrs. Stanton. I wish," declared Mr. Morris, "to say that positively."

"Oh — we were quite sure it was not *Mrs.*

Stanton," commented young Mr. Lynch leaning backward in his chair and placing his gloves nonchalantly on the big table at his hand. He smiled. "Wouldn't have been much of a 'story' if it had been."

Mr. Morris resented the comment.

"Is there anything else, Mr. Lynch?" he asked sharply.

"Well — yes. Where is Mr. Stanton?"

Mr. Morris was guilty of an involuntary glance at the music room doorway.

"Um —" he said, "he left two days ago for a trip to North Carolina. I have wired him and expect to be in communication with him shortly," he continued more easily. "When he returns I am sure he will instruct me to take decisive action with regard to these shameful and libelous innuendoes."

The lawyer paused impressively. Mr. Lynch showed no alarm.

"And Mrs. Stanton?" he asked promptly.

"She is here, and," Mr. Morris took the plunge deftly, "I am making this statement at her earnest solicitation in order — to —er, in order to put an end to this annoyance."

"Then there is not to be a divorce?"

Mr. Morris' reply indicated enormous amazement.

"Divorce?" Commiseration battled with sarcasm as he went on: "Mr. Lynch, if the papers were more conversant with the lives of the people about whom they busy themselves impertinently and unnecessarily, the stupidity of such a question would be obvious. I think, Mr. Lynch, that that is all."

The reporter got up.

"Thank you very much for your statement, Mr. Morris." He was almost at the door when he turned. "But will you tell me who was in Mr. Stanton's automobile?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders. He purposely raised his voice so that no word was lost to the hidden son of wealth.

"Some irresponsible chauffeur on a joy ride, I suppose — er — with his sweetheart, I suppose — a manicure or milliner, probably."

Lynch bowed slightly.

"Forgive one more question. Dr. Ball's visit?"

"He came to see Mrs. Stanton."

"I believe that covers everything," observed Mr. Lynch with an air of finality.

"I hope so," said the lawyer condescendingly.

"Good-day, sir."

"Good-day, Mr. Lynch."

Mr. Lynch was almost out of the door when Mr. Morris coughed. It was a cough that spoke. It meant something. And Mr. Lynch read its inarticulated message. He turned, bit the smile off his lips, and looked back questioningly.

"Mr. Edward Rowland Morris," said the lawyer distinctly.

"Oh, I have it correctly," said the reporter. "Good-day."

Hardly had he passed outside the room than Stanton strode into it.

"What the devil do you mean by calling me a drunken chauffeur," he demanded of his brother-in-law, effectively displacing that gentleman's air of self-complacence.

"What would you have me tell him?" came the angry retort. "The truth? I will if you wish." As though he fully meant to do so, he started in the direction of the hallway.

He fell back in dismay as he found himself

confronted by Mr. Lynch, the reporter, whose gray eyes were dancing with amusement.

"I beg your pardon," drawled Mr. Lynch, "but I forgot my gloves." Morris made a flurried movement back into the room. "Don't worry, I see them." Taking up the gloves on the table where he had left them, the newspaper man apologized further. "Awfully awkward," he said, "but you know I frequently forget my gloves when I interview people." For an instant, it appeared to both of the startled men as if he meant promptly to leave the room again. But he stopped, standing between them. He looked toward the lawyer.

"Mr. Edward Rowland Morris — isn't it?"

"Yes," said that gentleman, rubbing the plump fingers of one hand along the palm of it in his embarrassment.

"I wanted," said Mr. Lynch affably, "to give you full credit for your frank statement and — when a name is not well known — I am always particularly careful to get it right."

As Mr. Morris winced, the young man of the *City News* gave his attention in another direction.

"Would you care to discuss motoring — in North Carolina — Mr. Stanton?"

"I don't care to discuss anything," said Stanton. He had almost been caught laughing — the joke on the astute Morris was such a rich one.

"Will you say who was the lady with you?"

"No," shouted Stanton, angrily.

"Will you affirm or deny that Mrs. Stanton is about to file suit for divorce."

"Such a question is too impertinent."

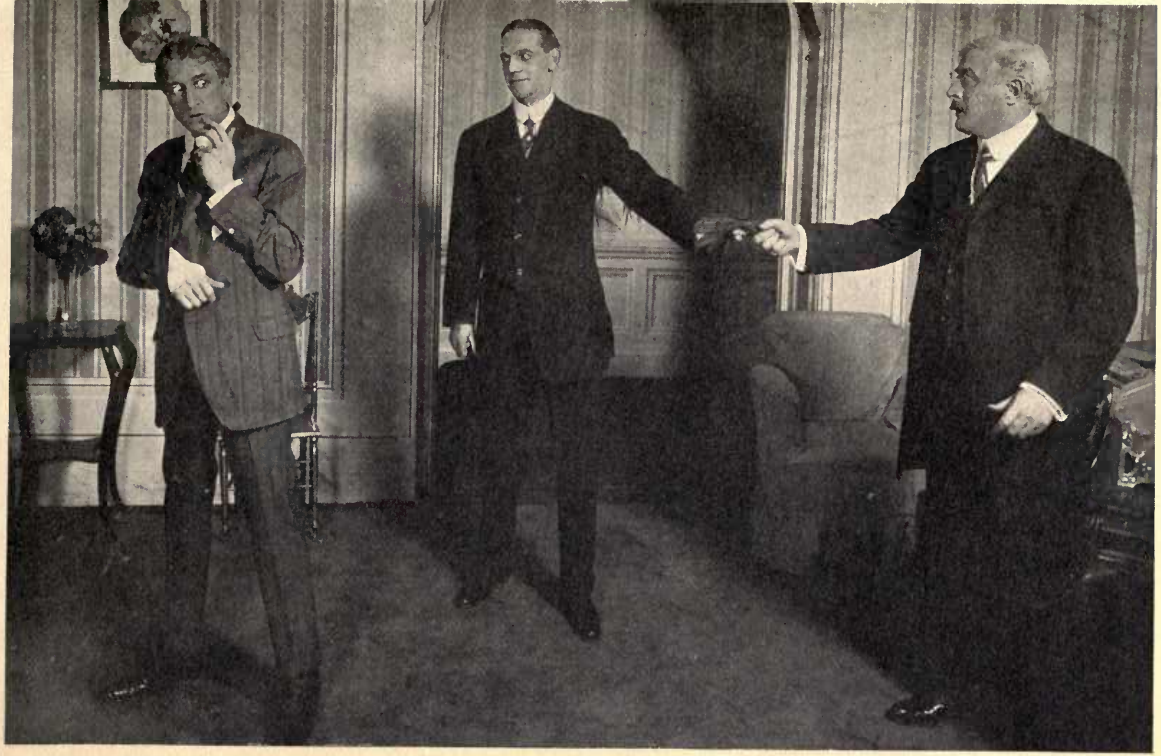
"May I see Mrs. Stanton?" continued Lynch regardlessly.

"Certainly not."

"I," interposed Morris hoarsely, "gave you a statement from Mrs. Stanton."

"Mrs. Stanton is not here at present," supplemented the young husband forcibly.

But as the words left his lips, he grimaced and flung up his arm in a gesture of helplessness and hopelessness because of what he saw. It was nothing other than the pretty face and slender form of his young wife. Her big gray eyes were fixed almost humorously and yet grievously, too, upon him, as she walked lightly into the room.



"I BEG YOUR PARDON," DRAWLED MR. LYNCH, "BUT I FORGOT MY GLOVES"

CHAPTER V

MARION STANTON

GRANTING young Mr. Lynch of the *City News* the possession of acute, trained powers of observation and deduction and the rapid study of the library of the Stanton home that he made on his first entrance, must have told him much of the inner lives of the wealthy young couple, must have hinted strongly at the causes for the crisis that had come, squirming like an ugly, vicious snake across their path of roses.

While containing no jarring vulgarities of decoration or ornamentation, the furnishings of the library, the mutual room of the young man and woman, was nevertheless in itself an open book of contrasting mental inclinations; an apparent conflict of tastes between the owners of the apartment. The heavy dull red curtains of the window and the brocaded portieres of the same material joining in a color scheme with the

black of the woodwork, was general in the room. But the low book shelves along the walls with the olive green or pale gray bindings of the volumes, the flowers in slender vases along the tops, the ornaments of jade and of ivory, the delicate ceramics displayed bespoke estheticism, softness, culture and even suggested mysticism. Sharply against the slender, fantastic orientalism of the flower-bearing vases, stood on an ebony pedestal a Greek discus thrower in white marble and the paintings on the walls, were those of action — battle scenes, coaching scenes in bold and brilliant golden frames. But again the vigor of these features was toned almost to nullification by the low divans with their Persian silk coverings, and the dark thick leather chairs, all designed for postures of graceful reclining.

Significantly this deduction would have left a final impression that as between the conflict of minds in the setting up of this room the gentler, more intellectual force had pervaded over the mind that saw the glory in battle, the harsh fun of sports and the fascination of the hunt.

When Stanton had said wistfully, " if there had been a house in the country and a couple of kids," he had, without analysis, sentimentally

but accurately explained why shortly after his marriage to charming Marion Stanton, Cupid had begun to languish in their wake.

The love affair itself had been so pretty in its incidents that even Society (as they are collectively termed who inhabit the opera boxes and Newport, traverse Europe and otherwise try to remain interested in life) lifted its pale, jaded, jeweled hands to applaud the events — the good, old-fashioned elopement in the face of parental storms, effected by the modern medium of an automobile. And as an added attraction, were the good looks and wholesomeness of both of them — the slenderness, grace and wit of the gray-eyed girl; the stalwart, good-humored healthiness of the youthful, handsome athlete.

There was some slight shock of revulsion felt among the old families in Gramercy and Washington Square; felt in the coteries of seasoned American aristocracy in which Marion Livingston had been born. Old General Livingston had frowned hard. But after all, the General was no curmudgeon. His irascibility faded into resignation in a reasonably short time. And more practical minds among the families de luxe were soon willing to concede that it was no

bad thing — an infusion of the Stanton wealth into the old circle whose houses some of them showed faded fronts and whose equipages continued to be the broughams and coupes of a former generation, not so much because of undue prejudice against fine big motor cars as in reality it was the impossibility of straightened incomes to meet the new feature of expense. Not all the incomes were straightened either, but what had been large wealth of a former generation, had become in an epoch of enormous fortunes, not much more than sufficient to rank their possessors as fairly well-to-do. And however the scathing designation of nouveau riche might be applied to the Stanton family with their mines in the West and mansions in Fifth Avenue and Newport (held merely on lease) Howard Stanton, personally, was capable of utterly disarming prejudice. He wore his father's wealth for all the world as if it were an old coat and save for the flamboyancy of certain of his escapades, easily stepped side by side with the traditionally accepted gentlemen of the city.

Original obstructions to the happiness of the young Stantons had all, therefore, disappeared

within a month after they had walked out of the little Poughkeepsie Chapel near Vassar, with the object of their elopement accomplished. The start was fair. Cupid may be pictured as having beamed with great satisfaction at this particular bit of work.

A thing unforeseen in a romance of haste and ardor developed very shortly after old General Livingston's influence and the Stanton money had secured for Howard and Marion, the possession of their mansion in Fifth Avenue, midway between the decadent social centre that had fallen into the hands of commerce and the aggressive and bustling turrets and porticos of the pretentious residences of the Pittsburgh ironmasters and the California and Nevada diggers of silver and gold.

It became soon apparent that Howard would rather hear the crack of his whip above a four-in-hand than the high note of the greatest singer that ever lived; that the report of a gun in the woodlands had greater thrill for him than the noblest tragedy man had ever written or could write; that all the lilts of Tennyson or Byron were not so sweet to him as the singing of the reel on his trout rod and the serious

aspects of life, the trend of the world in its progress meant nothing to him beyond its having supplied the automobile in which he could dart madly and dizzily over broad spaces. Cults, theories of life; broad aspirations he had none; wanted none and in the enlarged egotism that his wealth gave his youth he would frankly have told you that about them all he did not care "a damn."

And yet the other way was his wife's way. Keen and clever, her Vassar studies had meant much to her. While at Yale, Stanton had only been concerned at "making" the football team, the crew and the "sportiest" of the "frats." She had planned much that she would do by way of intellectual development for them both; she had conceived pretty schemes of charity, ingenious forms of social entertainments.

Quite unwittingly they had suddenly found themselves apart in their pursuits and the worst of it was, it became patently impossible for them to retrace to the starting point for a fresh beginning. Perhaps Marion unintentionally wore a little mask of amused scorn that had turned the big fellow back whenever he had thought to reach out to her so that, thereafter

they might walk side by side. Perhaps he never caught the light of pleading that sometimes flashed into her eyes, bespeaking the unuttered call from the inner Marion.

If then, the musical and literary set, the charitable organizations, the booksellers, the art dealers came to know Marion; the athletic fields, the race tracks, the card-playing clubs, the automobile roads and their halfway houses; the musical comedies and the Broadway restaurants had Howard for a familiar figure. Necessarily, the finer fibres of his nature warped and shriveled as, under this life, he took on a frivolous cock-tail cynicism; and had Marion followed him with jealous suspicion instead of regretful, sorry eyes, there had been certain adventures of his that might easily in the year just gone have led to a crisis as serious as the one imperatively brought home by the already notorious adventure of the wrecked automobile.

Despite, however, the half-unconscious estrangement into which, as young Stanton had told Morris, they had 'drifted,' yet both curiously but with equal certainty felt that deeper than all things they were meant for each other. Men and women all have felt

toward one another this mystic but potent assignment of individuals to each other that Nature makes. The perfect physical mating of big Stanton in his perfect type of young manhood and Marion with her prettiness, gentleness and soft slenderness, as perfect in her type of femininity, was plain to the most unobservant eye. And at odd moments, they felt this themselves, even after the breakfast table chat became desultory and the dinner courtesies of conversation little more than formal. In marrying, they had been obedient to Nature in her effort to do her work well. It was civilization that had led them along separate paths — the artificial directions they got from modern life which were defeating natural design.

Stanton's dismay as he beheld his wife enter the library was not only because her action brought her face to face with Lynch of the *City News*, who stood as a sort of harbinger of the hue and cry of harsh gossip that seemed doomed soon to sound ruinously all round them. He was fearfully wondering what her attitude would be? What would she do? They had not talked the matter over as yet. He knew only that he had brought humiliation and shame to

her and his remorse sought for no excuse; had none possible to offer. If he got what he deserved, he had long since inwardly admitted, he must lose her; must step out of her way; must seek no defense, indeed, had no defense of the charge of having besmirched their sweet romance with vulgar poltroonery.

Of one thing — he felt certain — she would make no great emotional display. However, her heart ached, there were the large, humorous gray eyes, the sweet whimsical yet characterful mouth to guide her otherwise than into any outburst of hysteria.

But what would she do?

Bring the matter to a swift and certain end by calmly denouncing him before his very face to Lynch?

He understood her well enough to understand that underlying her kindly humorous eyes was a light of steel, companion to a will of her own. He could not recall any episode in which she had ever decisively displayed it. But, of the few subtle things that he had known, was the realization that this will was there. At that very moment, he experienced stronger than ever the desire to stride forward and engulf her

in his arms; then to wave Morris and the reporter imperatively away and make the library the sacred scene of a humble confession and plea for reinstatement.

Of course, he did no such thing. Like the other men, he simply stood staring.

She halted for a period almost imperceptible, turning her gaze finally toward Morris and going toward him with both hands extended. He took them mechanically.

"Why, Ned!" said she, "when did you get back? You've been neglecting me. I have not seen you for an age."

"Been busy, Marion," said Morris perfunctorily.

And now her glance turned toward Lynch. He looked at her. No introduction forthcoming, there was an awkward pause.

The reporter broke it.

"Mrs. Stanton, I am Mr. Lynch of the *City News*."

Stanton took a step forward. His jaw was set.

"Mrs. Stanton has nothing to say, Mr. Lynch," he said.

She glanced at her husband gravely.

"Perhaps I have, Howard," she interjected. "What is it, Mr. Lynch?"

"We have a story of a divorce suit contemplated by you."

Mr. Lynch spoke gently now, without aggressiveness of inquiry.

Mrs. Stanton showed all her little white teeth in laughter. Morris and Stanton glanced at each other wonderingly. Young Mr. Lynch's eyes expressed also a degree of astonishment.

"Divorce — I?" She held her head on a side and turned her eyes toward Stanton. "Did you hear that, Howard?"

She looked back at the reporter.

"I think," she cried seriously, "the fact that I am here in Mr. Stanton's house is sufficient answer to such a silly story."

Stanton moved nearer to her.

"Have you heard the story of Mr. Stanton's accident?" persisted the reporter.

"Yes, indeed," she replied. "And how we have laughed over it. Haven't we, Howard?"

"Yes," said her husband, though his grin was stiff. "I should say we had."

"Most amusing," spoke Morris in *obligato*.

"I suppose," said Marion lightly, "that it

is so unusual in these days for a man to go motoring with his own wife that papers naturally jump to the conclusion that it must be another woman." She put her handkerchief to her lips. "Its really too amusing," she laughed.

"Then you were the lady in the car?"

"Of course, I was."

Mr. Lynch looked at the young matron with eyes that were not unkindly, but his voice had a tinge of the severe as he said;

"Then allow me to congratulate you, Mrs. Stanton on your splendid recovery — the lady in the car broke her leg — good-day."

Mr. Lynch was gone.

Mr. Morris coughed. He looked from one to the other and then with his best air of good-breeding left the room.

CHAPTER VI

AN UNIQUE CONVERSATION

YOUNG Mrs. Stanton shuddered.

"Broke her leg," she said in queer tones. "Broke her leg." And she sought a chair by the big library table, flung her arm out and rested her head upon it and her shoulders shook violently.

He followed her to the table and stood nonplused.

"Don't take on so, Marion," he urged. But as she vouchsafed no notice of him, he went on: "She really didn't break her leg. He was only bluffing."

Her shoulders continued to shake. Earnestly he leaned over her.

"Come — come, Marion," he pleaded.

She looked up. Where he had expected to see tears he beheld her countenance brilliant with amusement.

"Marion!" he cried, shocked. "You're laughing!"

And indeed, she was — heartily.

"Am I? I believe I am," she said. "But you see I haven't the honor of the lady's acquaintance." She made a small gesture of apology with the filmy lace handkerchief in her hand, "so you cannot expect me to be so very sympathetic."

The young man drew away, his eyes startled, his expression that of wonderment at the extraordinary fashion in which he deemed her to be acting. His mind formed only a conventional and as it turned out rather importune remonstrance.

"Marion," he said, "I'm ashamed of —"

"Most self-respecting men would be, my dear," she said evenly.

He drew further away.

"I don't mean — O, I cannot explain — I —"

"Don't apologize for her coming out safely, Howard. But you know I wouldn't really have minded if — if" and little Mrs. Stanton spoke with intensity, "she had broken her neck."

"That is not a womanly speech," he retorted angrily.

"O, yes, it is," she answered with a positive wag of the head. "You just don't know."

Stanton wheeled and walked away with his back toward her. Had a mirror shown him the sudden quick gesture of her hands toward him then, the glow of tenderness that her eyes took on, he would surely have turned with a realization that her strange gaiety was only acting; that beneath all perhaps she longed most to have her arms around his neck. But there was no friendly mirror.

"I might have known that that is how you would take it," he said bitterly. "Ever since you went in for this society thing all you can do is to laugh and sneer at everything."

"Do you wish me to take the situation seriously?" she asked quickly.

"Isn't it serious?" he exclaimed.

"I should hate to be forced to take it so," she answered studying the rug at her feet.

"Well — well — I might have been killed." expostulated Stanton.

She had regained her gay poise.

"Oh, Howard," she laughed, "you couldn't have done anything so ungentlemanly."

"Ungentlemanly?"

"Yes," she continued smoothly, "the lady — might have a husband or a father — or children — or —" she broke off only to continue contemptuously, "or any of the relations that women of that sort usually have. Think how you might have compromised her."

Anger held Stanton speechless as the subtle goad went on stinging. She got up and walked over to him.

"Now, my dear Howard," she said with a gentle hand on his shoulder, "you must promise that if you insist upon getting yourself into these absurd scrapes, you won't allow yourself to be killed."

"Oh, I'll promise you that," he grunted.

"Thank you dear."

She regarded him reflectively.

"One thing I've always liked about you is that you are naturally so obliging in little things. Now another man might say 'yes' — he would kill himself 'if he wanted to' — but you are not that way. You have the true idea of the right way to hold a woman — make

her all the little promises — you wish to keep."

"I suppose," he said in something of her own tone now. "You would have been seriously annoyed if I had been killed?"

"O, indeed, I should, Howard, dear. Why, you know how unbecoming black is to me. And as ours was a — a love match — I should have to wear it for the limit."

Stanton said nothing for a time. He walked over to the fire-place and looked down at nothing in particular.

"Well," said he, "I suppose this ends it."

"What ends what?" she asked, but there was a sudden strain in her voice instead of the flippancy which she intended.

"What I've been doing — this —" he was halted for a word that might not describe the situation too harshly.

She took up the talk sweetly.

"Disgracing yourself and your family?"

"Disgracing!" he cried sharply. He turned quickly on the word and when he did so struck his bandaged arm on the back of a chair. It drew out of him an exclamation of pain.

Little Marion was betrayed by it. She went toward him hurriedly.

"My poor boy," she murmured and her hands went swiftly to the sling in which his arm hung. "Does it hurt much?" She drew him over to the sofa. "You've slipped the bandage," she went on with unmistakable tenderness.

"It isn't anything," he said sullenly, boyishly.

"Does it hurt much?"

"A little."

She worked deftly over the bandages.

"I hope it was thoroughly cleaned," she said. "It seems terribly swollen," and again; "Does it hurt much?"

"Oh, it is not nearly so bad as the last motor smash-up."

She looked up at him suddenly.

"You remember that last time, then?"

"Sure," he began. "It was —" and stopped.

"Our honeymoon in the Berkshires," she supplied. There was a silence. They smiled. "How absurd!" she said.

"Do you remember that evening?" he asked, his eyes resting now for the first time fairly upon her.

"Yes."

It was spoken softly.

"I SUPPOSE," HE SAID IN SOMETHING OF HER OWN TONE NOW, "YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN SERIOUSLY ANNOYED IF I HAD BEEN KILLED" *Page 69*

"The turn in the road just below at the elbow of that steep hill," he pursued.

"We got by the first turn safely," she rejoined. "Don't you remember? It was the second turn. I'll never forget it."

She half closed her eyes, as if making an effort to recall something.

"What were you doing?" she asked.

"Why, Marion — er — well, you must remember that!"

"It is very indistinct."

He looked at her keenly. She made no sign.

"You know," he said, "we came flying down the hill, taking the turn on two wheels, and the wind in our faces and the glory of the evening sun on your hair and — we were laughing; laughing with the joy of being alive, being together, being alone, and I forgot everything and leaned towards you and —"

She affected forgetfulness no further.

"And then that falling away feeling," she said, "the crash and the darkness." She stopped and tenderly placed her hand upon his injured arm. "I just remember before the crash came, your throwing your arm about me —"

"And when I came to —" he interposed.

"I came to first, you remember."

"So you did. When I came to my head was in your lap and you were cuddling me and nursing me."

"Of course I was. Why you saved my life. I would have been killed if you had not jerked me so that I fell on you and broke your arm."

"That was the first time you ever sat on me," he suddenly said and smiled.

"We had not been married long then, you know," she answered explanatorily.

But he shied quickly back to their memory.

"And afterwards that walk of two miles in the moonlight with you holding my broken arm."

"What a rough place it was," she commented.

"Gee! — you were good to me," he said with frank enthusiasm.

"Absurd."

He wagged his head, laughing at her.

"What a start that was for a honeymoon! A big smash-up at the outset."

"That wasn't my fault," she returned. "You did it."

"Did it nothing," he retorted warmly. "If you hadn't looked so good I wouldn't have leaned toward you."

"I suppose," she said slowly and in another tone, "you have the leaning habit in automobiles, Howard."

"Can you beat it?" he demanded. "Whenever anything important happens I always hurt my arm. The honeymoon. And — and now divorce even —".

She left him suddenly. She looked at his arm from afar.

"Is it all right now," she said.

But he followed her.

"Marion," he called and she did not move away from him. "Marion, I wonder why we can't get on. We used to be very congenial, I thought."

"No, Howard, you pretended to like what I did."

"No, indeed. You were the one who pretended. But — oh, Marion — that society game I never could stand for."

"Poor boy," she said. "How selfish I was."

"You selfish? The idea! I —"

She protested, the tendrils of her golden hair

loosening about her temples as she shook her head.

"Oh, but I was, Howard. I should have taken more interest — in sport. But racing was always tiresome to me," she admitted hopelessly, "and late suppers always gave me a headache."

"No, indeed. I was a brute."

"You were not, Howard."

"Yes; I was."

"No, you weren't. Other things perhaps but — never —"

"Confound it!" cried Stanton heatedly. "That's the way! You never will agree with me about anything. Let me be a brute if I want to be. I'm a brute and I'm going to be a brute."

She looked at him intently.

"Well, then perhaps you are."

"And you'll be well rid of me."

He walked over to the big table. He fussed over the newspapers with his uninjured hand. He looked around at her.

"I suppose you'll marry again?"

"Do you?" she said impersonally.

"Whitney's a jolly nice fellow."

"Now look here, Howard," she began indignantly but paused and then laughed. "We are still married, Howard — and — I — I — haven't asked any questions about your future."

"O," he said, "I beg pardon."

"Don't mention it."

"Marion," he declared suddenly. "I am going to do the right thing. I haven't acted right I know. I'll do everything to atone by helping you rid yourself of me." He hesitated, glanced and gulped, flushed and finally added:

"I'll — I'll even give the names."

"I know they will appreciate that."

"Now why must you always be so sarcastic?"

"I thought," she said incisively, "that there was only one woman in that car."

"She does not count," he retorted shortly.

She regarded him steadily.

"She will count if there is a divorce and it will be tried *publicly!*"

"Marion!"

"Pray why should we make an exception in her case?"

"She is a lady," he asserted stoutly.

He was stung into repetition by Marion's contemptuous laughter.

"I said she was a lady."

"Doubtless!" she scoffed.

"I tell you —" began Stanton.

But Marion confronted him and he winced under the sweeping vehemence of her voice as she said:

"No — I will tell you something! I've known for a long time that you have not been acting entirely as you should. But it has not really troubled me perhaps as much as it should. But I have never done one of these women the honor to be jealous of her. This one seems different. You say she belongs to your station in life as well as your own class of morals. Very well. If there is a divorce it will be tried publicly and she shall stand with you — disgraced!"

"Marion," Stanton cried, "she is innocent!"

"She shall prove it," she said defiantly.

They stood tensely regarding each other.

The door bell rang sharply.

"I wonder who on earth that is?"

"Another reporter, probably."

"God forbid," exclaimed Stanton fervently.

And it wasn't.

CHAPTER VII

A NEW INVASION

STANTON would probably not so earnestly have prayed that it should not be another reporter at the door-bell, had he known who in reality it was that sought entrance to his home in this time of great predicament.

His concern had been and still was so directly with Marion and how she was going to face the humiliating episode and what she intended to do; that he had not contemplated the tributary troubles bound to come in the wake of the widespread publication of the misadventure of the night.

Had his mind reverted to the Livingston home in Gramercy Park or to the leased mansion occupied for the Spring season by his mother at Tuxedo, he might have faintly or even vividly pictured the sensation that the morning newspapers carried to both places; and

the ringing of the door-bell might have carried a warning of what was to follow.

The distressed Wilson merely stood aside and allowed two ladies to enter. He failed to come ahead to make the least announcement and so it was that Howard and Marion in the midst of threshing out their over-whelming difficulty, or, at least, seeking to thresh it out — found themselves confronting Marion's mother and the pert and energetic Mrs. Bob Livingston, wife of Marion's big brother and aggressively, since her marriage, a champion of Livingston pride and traditions.

Gentle, sweet-faced and dignified, the senior Mrs. Livingston was of the quaint pretty type of the clinging woman of by-gone days. She had always unquestionably accepted the domination of the General, long before he wore such an awesome title ahead of his name. And next to the General, she possessed immense admiration for her daughter, Marion, whose gentle asserted independence had from time been effectively shown to the wondering woman. She had been willing to concede that Marion had inherited much of the General's strength of character. And Marion, while directing her

own life in, for instance, so important an affair as her marriage, had nevertheless always displayed to this sweet-faced mother a fine tenderness and consideration that had enhanced the natural tie of affection.

So palpably was Mrs. Livingston disturbed, so plainly on the verge of an emotional outburst, that Marion hastened to call: "Hello, mother, dear," just as cheerily as she could.

"My dear child," said Mrs. Livingston with something dangerously near a sob. She embraced her daughter affectionately, almost convulsively.

Pert little Mrs. Bob Livingston was meanwhile in her quick, bird-like fashion, submitting Marion's husband to an indignant scrutiny.

"Good heavens!" said Stanton realizing the portend of the visit and vaguely becoming conscious of stress ahead.

"Don't you see Howard, mother?" said Marion.

"Good-morning, Mr. Stanton," said the matron stiffly.

"Good-morning," he replied with a cordiality plainly overdone.

"Hello, Salie," smiled Marion. "I was just going over to see you. Howard and I have been so terribly lonely."

Mrs. Bob Livingston who out of an experience now one month old, regarded herself as peculiarly fitted to inform womankind of methods in all emergencies for making husbands travel kindly and up to form in their marital harness, looked upon her sister-in-law with commiseration.

"Lonely — you and Howard? You seem to have plenty of friends outside," she said briskly. "Goodness knows they were anxious enough. One of them took my picture without even waiting for me to turn the right side of my face. I know it will be horrid!"

"Indeed," fluttered Marion's mother. "One of them asked me what I thought of How — of Mr. Stanton."

"As though she could tell them!" interposed Mrs. Bob.

Stanton started indignantly. But when he spoke, it was only to say.

"I have a great deal to do this morning and — if you will excuse me —."

DISPLAYED PINNED TO HER

"Certainly," cried Mrs. Livingston frigidly.

"We will," chimed Mrs. Bob and eyed him till he left the room. Then she flung herself toward her sister-in-law. "Oh, Marion," she cried, "isn't it terrible?"

Marion only turned toward her mother.

"What has happened to our little bride. Has Bob done anything?"

Her mother thwarted the attempted evasion.

"Marion," she remonstrated, "how can you joke?"

"I'm not joking, mother. What is wrong?"

"Wrong!" cried Mrs. Bob. She immediately submitted herself to a remarkable operation, tugging frantically at the extremely tight-fitting skirt of her fashionable gown and in the final lift of it displayed pinned to her petticoat a copy of the *Evening Journal*, its black and crimson headline showing to fine advantage the word; "SCANDAL." Unpinning the paper, little Mrs. Bob handed it importantly to her sister-in-law.

Marion took it, scarcely glanced at it, repressed an exclamation of disgust and flung the sheet indifferently upon the table.

"Well, Salie, dear. I'm relieved," said Marion lightly. "I've been wondering what that was ever since you came in."

"Yes;" answered Mrs. Bob complacently; "even a piece of paper under these new skirts does look like a physical deformity, but I was determined, dear, you should see it. I thought it my duty as one married woman to another. And, of course, I couldn't be seen, carrying the sheet."

"It was sweet and thoughtful of you, dear."

With increased complacency little Mrs. Bob perched on a chair.

"I must say Marion," she commented,—"I don't want to criticize you, understand—but I must say I think if you managed Howard a little more firmly, this scandal would not have occurred. We wives must make a firm stand. The whole future of the country depends upon us. And we should appreciate the responsibility. I know I do."

"I'm quite sure you do, dear," assented Marion with a vigorous nod of her pretty head.

"Yes—I have spoken seriously to Bobby. We will never have anything like this in our family. There will be no opportunity. I make

him account for every minute of his time — here." Mrs. Bob produced from her purse, a little black note-book. "I have a book; he has a book." She gazed at her sister-in-law, very seriously. "Every night I check him up and if he cannot account for every minute, I don't even let him kiss me. Do you see, my dear? Now — why don't you try that with Howard?"

A shrewder person than Mrs. Bob might have been able to discern that this talk was reducing Marion to a wretched state of nerves. But the bird-like bride's attitude denoted that she expected a reply — a favorable reply to her suggestion.

Marion answered firmly.

"It might not prove so good a system," she said; "if some night I might want him to kiss me."

"Oh, Marion!" said her mother.

"Well, mother, is there anything so disreputable in a married woman wishing her husband to kiss her? I'm sure Salie approves."

"Salie has been married only one month."

"I don't suppose it is proper," said Salie, "just on the eve of divorce. Speaking of divorce, Marion —"

"Why speak of it, dear?" interjected Marion.

"Not that I want you to get a divorce — but if you should, you know, you would not wish this lovely house to go out of the family and Bob and I —"

"Salie!" said Mrs. Livingston sternly.

Marion was not unconscious of the bitter humor of it all. But she had been indulging too much in strained laughter in the hour just gone.

"Salie, dear," she suggested, "won't you hie away and tell Howard your ideas? Surely he will appreciate them."

"Of course," said Mrs. Bob eagerly. "I'll talk to him," she said determinedly and vanished in pursuit of her quarry.

"Don't bully him," called Marion after her.

Mrs. Livingston scanned the doorway through which Salie had disappeared.

"I cannot for the life of me," the mother announced, "understand what your brother Robert, ever saw in that girl."

"O, they will be happy, I suppose."

"Yes," came the rather querulous rejoinder, "I suppose so. One can never tell who will be

THE BIRD-LIKE BRIDE'S ATTITUDE DENOTED THAT SHE EXPECTED A REPLY

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happy and who will not. Now, I supposed that you —"

"Mother — don't!"

Clearly now Marion was overwrought to the point of break-down. The maternal instinct brought Mrs. Livingston forward with quick sympathy.

"Can't you tell your mother all about it, dear."

There was a definite sweet comfort to the young wife in what she immediately did, dropping on a foot-stool near the sofa and bending over to rest her face in her mother's lap. Tenderly the mother stroked her daughter's hair. And when Marion lifted her face, it was to say:

"It was partly my fault, mother, I suppose. I did not take as much interest as I should in the things that amused Howard."

"I should hope not!" said the matron in horror.

"I did — I did, you know, mother, go in for society a good deal."

"Of course."

The young wife looked vaguely out across the room.

"He did not realize that it was because I was lonesome. Sometimes, mother, I think men are awful fools."

"Why they are almost always," said Mrs. Livingston. "But, that doesn't excuse Howard Stanton! Bringing about such a scandal! Now we will have all the horrible notoriety of a divorce suit —"

"Divorce suit," young Mrs. Stanton sat up straight. "Oh, no; put that idea out of your head, mother."

"But, my daughter, what can you do? You can't live with him after this scandal. Consider your own dignity. It's scarcely proper. Why, when I came this mornng I hardly expected to find you here!"

"Where did you expect to find me? Out on the street talking to the reporters?" Marion's gray eyes took on anew their old humorous twinkle as she put the question.

"Marion!"

"Mother, dear," said the young woman feelingly; "it's time to end this hypocrisy that is merely a confession of weakness. It is time, I tell you, for the good women to wake up; we

fight to get our husbands; then let us fight to hold them. We good women are too fond of sitting still and pretending to be coldly superior while our hearts break as the other women steal our husbands." Marion arose. "Well," she said, "I'm not going to be like that. Not much. If she gets my husband she'll earn him."

Mrs. Livingston fingered her lorgnette uneasily.

"Marion," she reproved, "you always did have impossible ideas."

"Impossible. I'll show you, mother, how impossible this one is."

Mrs. Livingston stared inquiringly at her daughter.

"What are you going to do, my dear?"

Marion bent her head; her handkerchief at her lips.

"Never mind, now, mother," she said softly, "just curb that curiosity. I have a plan. Yes: I have a plan. Just you wait and see."

"Well, all I can say," remarked Mrs. Livingston, tapping her lorgnette on the fingers of a gloved hand, "is I wish you had married Oliver Whitney."

"I did not love Oliver Whitney," answered the daughter warmly. "I loved Howard. I do love Howard."

Mrs. Livingston drew herself up.

"Marion," she announced, "if you are not crazy, you ought to be. I don't know where you get such impossible ideas. Certainly not from my side of the family."

And now at her last word the door-bell rang again.

"That," said Mrs. Livingston significantly, "must be your father."

Wilson entered the room.

"Mrs. Stanton," he announced. The next instant, the lady from Tuxedo was on the scene.

"IF SHE GETS MY HUSBAND SHE'LL EARN HIM"

CHAPTER VIII

THE MOTHERS' TOURNAMENT

IN manner somewhat indicative of a rush, Howard's mother entered the room; a large, decidedly handsome woman, too well-figured to be termed buxom; retaining too much yet of bloom in her face to be thought elderly. She was positive in manner — in glance, gesture and opinions to the point of being over-bearing. But woman-like she had her tendernesses and what more natural than that the greatest of these was her love for her big, good-looking son, Howard. Lacking, perhaps, the fine fibre of Marion and her mother, she had yet a certainty of poise, a dignity not unimpressive.

Marion knew, of course, that Mrs. Stanton would, however illogical the attitude might be, take sides with Howard. Indeed, she would have been disappointed did her mother-in-law show any other inclination. Her greeting of the other woman was, however, restrained.

She went toward her expecting to be kissed, but was relieved to find that Mrs. Stanton was satisfied with the more distant salutation of a handshake.

"Good morning," said Marion, "it was sweet of you to come so early, and I'm awfully glad to see you."

"I would have been here two hours ago," declared Mrs. Stanton emphatically, "but for the intolerable insolence of the police. Coming in from Tuxedo they arrested us twice for speeding. And when the magistrate learned whose car it was, he said, 'Oh, Howard Stanton's mother,' and then doubled the fine! — besides being most impertinent."

Mrs. Stanton further expressed her outraged feelings by a hasty adjustment of the swathings of her automobile veil. She then saw Marion's mother, who had arisen.

"Good morning, Mrs. Stanton," said Mrs. Livingston, quite without any expression in her tone.

Mrs. Stanton first seated herself in a chair at some distance.

"Good morning," she returned with equal coldness.

Little lights of laughter began to dance in Marion's eyes as she regarded both.

"With the example of your son's accident, you were very brave to come so fast," said Mrs. Livingston sweetly.

"I was not coming fast," replied Mrs. Stanton icily, "a bare forty-mile rate. I really don't understand why some gentlemen don't become judges so we might have a little justice and courtesy in our courts. The idea of delaying a mother on her way to visit her injured son."

"You must stay to lunch," interjected Marion cordially. "It will be a great pleasure to Howard and me, having our two mothers with us."

"Thank you, dear," said Mrs. Livingston, and before Mrs. Stanton could reply, Marion continued:

"I'll run away and fetch Howard — if you two will amuse each other," and Marion, once outside the room, permitted herself the indulgence of a mischievous little smile.

Rigid silence ensued. Mrs. Livingston stared at a picture. Mrs. Stanton stared at the fireplace. Twice each lady uttered a nervous cough.

The more highly-strung nerves of Mrs. Livingston found the situation intolerable, and her courage was not wanting. She broke the silence.

"Beg your pardon. You were saying?"

"I," said Mrs. Stanton frigidly, "was not saying anything."

Mrs. Livingston fell back on the amenities.

"It's a charming day, so bright and cheerful."

She caught herself on the last word, realizing that under the circumstances, it had sounded vividly ironical.

Mrs. Stanton spoke more forcibly.

"Did those newspaper ruffians insult you?" she asked.

"They were most impertinent. They took my picture."

"They wouldn't dare do that to me."

"No; I don't think they would," observed Mrs. Livingston very readily.

"Well, it certainly was not my son's desire to get into the papers."

"Do you mean to insinuate that it was my daughter's?"

Mrs. Stanton lifted her chin.

"A young man of position must have his amusements, provided he lives within his income."

"I think," said Mrs. Livingston as evenly as she could, "he should always remember his position and not humiliate his wife. Fortunately, my daughter has her own income — a wedding present from her father."

Mrs. Stanton frowned.

"I trust my son maintains his own establishment."

Mrs. Livingston shrugged her shoulders.

"That is exactly the trouble," she replied, "he maintains too many."

"Has Mrs. Howard Stanton complained?" demanded the Tuxedo matron.

"The Livingston women have a pride of birth which prevents them complaining."

Mrs. Stanton sat up.

"Oh — the Stanton men never permit outside interference in their family affairs," she said politely.

"Fortunately, then, the courts provide a remedy," observed Marion's mother.

"Most fortunately." Mrs. Stanton's tone was overburdened with its accent of assent.

Mrs. Livingston thoughtfully sprung her lorgnettes and as thoughtfully closed them.

"Of course," she commented, "there must be this unavoidable disgrace of an old and honored name dragged through the mire of a divorce case."

A catch came into her voice now and suddenly Mrs. Stanton sniffed quite audibly.

"Divorce! Oh, they should think of their parents! If Mr. Stanton were alive!"

"General Livingston will take some action," said Marion's mother reassuringly.

"I think," declared Mrs. Stanton very solemnly and determinedly, "that they should both be spanked."

A second later, however, at sight of Marion and Howard entering together, she was on her feet, her solicitude uppermost at sight of his bandages.

"My boy — my dear boy."

"Mother, I'm glad to see you."

"My boy."

She embraced him, lingered over him quite as if he were still a plump mischief-maker in knickerbockers.

"Now — now, mother. There is nothing the

matter. I am all right," Howard assured her, but she embraced him anew.

Little Mrs. Bob brisked into the library, her pretty mouth set as tightly as its rosy lips would close. She sought out Marion.

"I spoke to Howard," she said furiously, "and he was perfectly horrid. Practically told me to mind my own business."

"Why didn't you, dear?" suggested Marion softly.

"Oh!" And little Mrs. Bob fluttered across the room and perched tremblingly upon a chair.

Wilson, harbinger of fresh sensations, the morning long, appeared in the doorway.

"General Livingston," he announced.

CHAPTER IX

MARION'S DECISION

IF the scandal sent abroad by the newspapers had sorely distressed and humiliated Mrs. Livingston, outraged Mr. Morris' respectability, moved little Mrs. Bob to a fever height of excitement and caused Mrs. Stanton to declare that both her son and Marion should be spanked, in the mind of General Livingston, guided by every precept in the mosaic of a gentleman of the old school, there was the hot conviction that Howard Stanton ought to be shot or — well, horse-whipped at least.

Without definite plan of action, but flung along by his seething anger, General Livingston made his way to the Stanton home. He pictured Marion ashamed and in tears; broken-hearted, fainting now and then, or perhaps in a complete state of nervous collapse, and this idea kept the straight old, fine-featured stern-faced gentleman of sixty-five at a point of fiery irasci-

bility. It found expression now and then in a muttered stream of battlefield vocabulary.

To have reared his sweet little girl most tenderly and seen her married to a parvenu — that had been bad enough despite the fellow's undeniable good looks and easy manners and great wealth. But to have his "little girl"— and he never thought of her in any other way; his "little girl" that he loved to the full of idolization, cheated, dishonored, discarded by this selfsame parvenu, goaded the good General's emotions until he felt like a human bomb — one with the fuse lighted and about to burst.

Outwardly he appeared in the Stanton library with two fiery patches of crimson burning in his thin cheeks and his mouth drawn straight under his white mustache.

Marion was alarmed. She could read the storm signals. She hurried to him.

"Dad!" she cried and hugged him.

"Marion, my little girl," he returned, kissing her tenderly, holding her as one might hold a wounded creature.

Rolled and gripped hard in one hand was a copy of the latest edition of one of the most sensational newspapers.

"Oh, Dad," she bantered quickly, "did you bring another of those horrible things into the house."

She took it from him, laughing to show she did not care, while he studied her in wonder. She read the headline aloud and laughingly:

"*Family Conference!* O, how absurd."

She laughed again, tossing the paper on the table.

"Marion," said the General curtly, "I have come to take you home."

But she stood away from him, smiling slightly; yet when she spoke, it was in a manner of simple dignity:

"I am at home, father."

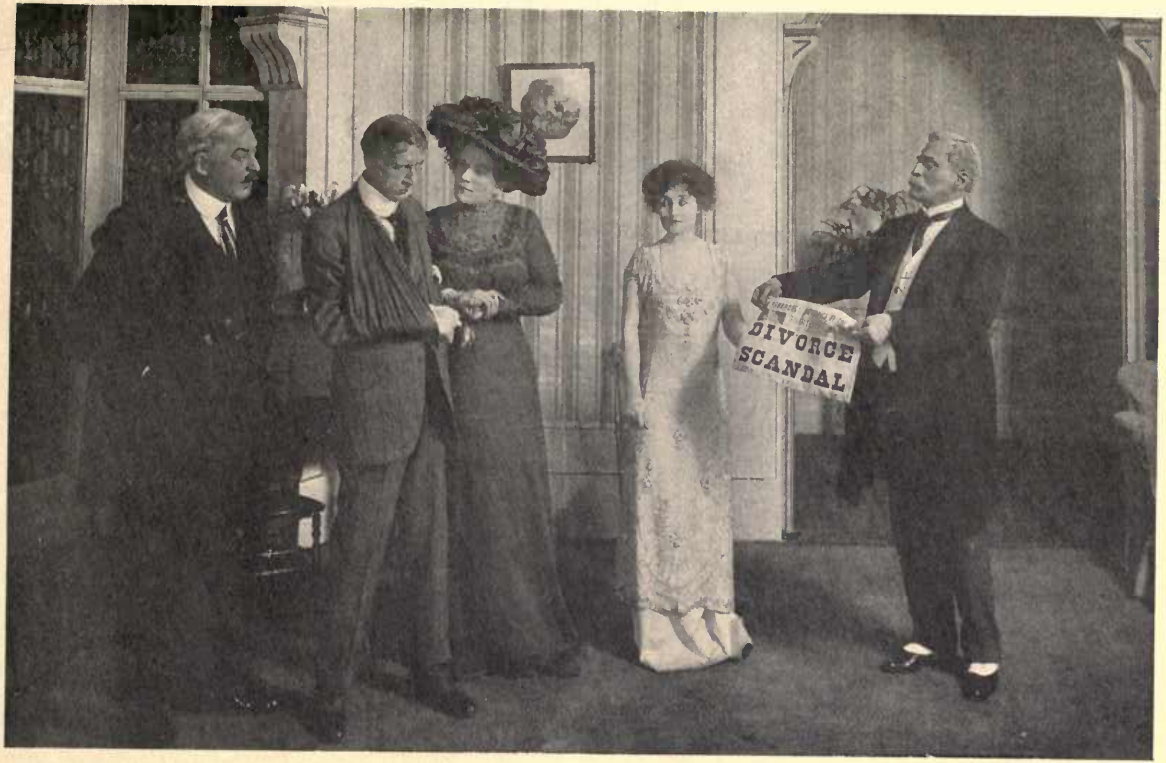
Stanton, who had stood aside, knowing well what he might expect in consideration from this quarter of Marion's family, now that he heard her speak to this effect, walked resolutely forward and faced the old man.

"This is Marion's home, General," he asserted.

General Livingston's gray eyes narrowed.

"I am Marion's father and I do not recognize your right, sir, to decide in this matter."

"I am Marion's husband and whether you



"THIS IS MARION'S HOME, GENERAL," HE ASSERTED

recognize it or not, I have the right," Stanton retorted, bluntly.

And now Marion spoke, not loudly, but with a ring of determination in her voice notwithstanding.

"And they both guessed wrong the very first time," she smiled pleasantly as she said this. But again looking from one to another, her fine-featured, small, delicate countenance was altogether serious.

"Father — Howard — you are both dears and you are both acting exactly as you should. But dear men, that day when you grandly decided and women meekly submitted has gone by. Father, I owe you respect. I owe Howard allegiance — so long as he deserves it."

She clasped her hands behind her and looked at them freely and steadily.

"But no one," she continued, "can decide for me anything that is going to affect my whole life. I will decide it myself — for myself — and when and how I please."

Mrs. Livingston and Mrs. Stanton sat very quietly; little Mrs. Bob was very wide-eyed; the General looked on aghast. On Stanton's mouth showed the merest suggestion of a smile.

Wilson appeared in the doorway. Marion's face lighted at sight of him.

"My decision is," she said lightly, "that we all go to lunch. Ah, Ned," she called as Morris appeared, "will you take mother; father — take Mrs. Stanton."

The others, dazed as the first couple, joined the little procession on its way to the dining-room.

But Marion laid her hand on Stanton's arm.

"Just a moment, Howard," she requested.

He came back into the room. They were silent for awhile. Then he said:

"Well, Marion, what are you going to do? I will abide by your decision."

Marion breathed a little sharply. She pressed her hand against her bosom.

"Who is she?" she asked.

The young husband shook his head.

"I told you, Marion," he declared, "she is innocent of anything wrong."

"Who is she?"

As he did not respond, she stood for a space with lowered eyes; then she lifted her glance and said:

"I promise you not to use her name if I sue."

Stanton hesitated.

"Now — who is she?" urged Marion.

It was with an aspect of shame-facedness that he finally spoke the name.

"Mrs. Blakemore."

"Mrs."— she paused on the name. "The rich widow from the South?"

"Yes."

"Do you love her?"

She tried hard to ask the question easily; tried hard not to ask it with a sob, and she succeeded.

Stanton did not readily reply, but when he did it was with an air of full determination.

"Hang it, Marion," he blurted, "you've been frank; I'll be as frank as I can be — I'm darned if I know!"

She recoiled a little. But her courage of demeanor endured.

"Good; then I'll give you a chance to find out," she returned. "A man goes to the woman who offers most to his nature. I am a woman. She is a woman. If I cannot hold you against all women, I do not want you."

She stepped up closely to him, looking him squarely in the eyes.

"We," she said curtly, "will invite Mrs. Blakemore here and put it to the test."

The amazed Stanton steadied himself by gripping the back of a chair. He thrust his head forward, his mouth half open in the shock of the announcement.

"Marion!" cried the young husband desperately.

She smiled. She waved her hand triumphantly.

"That is my decision."

CHAPTER X

MRS. BLAKEMORE

IN a bow window of her apartment on Riverside Drive, Mrs. Ruth Blakemore, having just finished breakfast, gently pushed several articles of the silver service further back on the table and drew forward a salver on which was her morning mail, left there by her mulatto maid. There were at least a dozen letters. She opened the first languidly with a smile at the big, round boyish handwriting that the envelope revealed. As her eyes perused the contents she laughed ripplingly.

Mrs. Blakemore was a beautiful woman. That woman must be beautiful indeed who looks entirely so in a morning gown an hour after she has arisen. Her age was either a little before or a little behind the thirtieth year. Youth, health, vitality were still with her. It was probably a superabundance of all three that led Mrs. Blakemore along the paths she so constantly

traveled — the gay suppers, gay rides and drives and merely "gay" affairs with members of the opposite sex.

She had never ceased congratulating herself on the good fortune of her marriage. She had been sorely set against it when at the suggestion of her maiden aunts she received the attention of the wealthy middle-aged Northerner who had established big cotton mills near her Atlanta home. Just then her vision was filled fondly with the picture of dashing Hugh Pendleton, on his prancing thoroughbred. But the thoroughbred was about all that Hugh owned by way of a fortune. The maiden aunts, themselves eking out the dull existence of the shabby genteel on the smallest of incomes, were sorely concerned for the livelihood of their niece when their deaths should leave her alone in the world. For the little incomes would stop entirely then and the girl would be penniless. This they weepingly confided to her and, moreover, set before her the allurement of the wealth that might be her's — the luxuries that would be at her command, the pride with which she might move in paths where she had been largely obliged to walk with a humility alien to her nature.

There had come a day when Hugh did not seem as fascinating and handsome as usual, when the touch of his hand did not carry the usual thrill, and that same evening the gypsy eyes of the black-haired Southern girl smiled in kindly assent on the sixth proposal of the middle-aged but ardent Northerner.

In the new life that offered she entered with the splendid vim of her vigorous nature, with the devoted middle-aged manufacturer always somewhat breathless in her wake. She toured Europe, journeyed into the Orient and began nicking off flirtations on her fan. It soon became necessary to get another fan. And still another. Her middle-aged husband, never exactly repentant of his bargain, had, however, begun to worry considerably over her insatiable desire for the society of members of his own sex. Then after a very late and heavy supper, an attack of acute indigestion ended his troubles forever in so far as this earth was concerned.

At the time of the affair of the automobile accident with Howard Stanton, Mrs. Blakemore's collection of fans was a remarkably large one. And she was still looking forward to the increase with interest and amusement unabated.

The letter that caused her laughter was the eager appeal of a college youth that she should not forget her promise to do him the honor of attending the commencement exercises which he pointed out with unconscious humor on this April morning, were not now far off. She remembered the meeting with the boy at a theatre party during the Christmas holidays. There had been a luncheon afterwards. At the end of the luncheon, he had proposed to her. That evening she had laughingly made another nick in her fan — a rather small one.

A further examination of her morning's mail could have revealed that the beautiful and altogether dazzling Mrs. Blakemore had no particular preferences in the matter of the age of her quarries. There was a dinner invitation from a white-haired judge; a novelist of forty pleaded for favor; a club-man of thirty-five and a ridiculous little French count who dyed his hair, but apparently could not or would not die himself, had written her from Paris a great outburst of sentimentality which to more sensitive eyes would have appeared pitifully ghastly, because of the quivering writing indited by the palsied old hand.

"The antiquated idiot!" Mrs. Blakemore said, and laughed immoderately when she came to it.

But before she had gone down the entire pile, she came upon a letter which she took up and scanned curiously. It was addressed in a feminine hand and Mrs. Blakemore got very few letters which bore feminine handwriting. Moreover, the handwriting was different than that of any woman whom she knew.

The note was brief, but its few words started in the mind of the young widow a very long train of thought, and the more she followed it the less satisfactorily was she able to understand the situation.

The square, heavy sheet of paper she held in her hand was nothing other than a cordial invitation from Marion Stanton, asking her to attend a dinner which from the wording of the letter was evidently to be held in her honor.

This letter, coming only a few days after the automobile accident in which Mrs. Blakemore, notwithstanding the statements of Lynch of the *City News*, had suffered only the injury of a few slight bruises and something of a shock and something also of fear that the thin ice on which

she had been moving would now break and let her down into social obloquy; logically caused Mrs. Blakemore no little wonderment.

With her small, smooth hand she pushed back a heavy tress of her jet black hair from her forehead and looked out through the broad window at the big, bright river beyond. In a little while, such was the resiliency of her temperament, she smiled. She had quite made up her mind that it was all right; that Howard Stanton, infatuated with her, had managed to keep secret her identity as his companion on the unfortunate ride and that he was using his wife as an unknowing tool, to lift her out of the possible suspicion of certain of their intimates by causing her to be entertained, a guest of honor, in his home.

It was clever of Stanton, she decided — a much more clever notion than she would have credited him with being able to conceive. She experienced no little of a pleasant thrill also in the contemplation that this thing which she believed him to have done, furnished so startling a proof that her sway over him was strong indeed.

It was a deep nick for her fan surely to have

subjugated so absolutely the handsomest young blood in town. There was a picture of him in a gold frame on her writing table. And now she looked over to it and smiled.

Presently she arose, went over to the table, sat at it, drew her writing paper into position, poised the tip of gold-inlaid penholder for a few seconds at her scarlet lips, and then, smiling, penned to Marion Stanton a reply.

It was a graceful, even warm communication of acceptance. Quite as informal and responsive as Marion's invitation had been also informal and wholly cordial.

Had Mrs. Blakemore seen Mrs. Marion Stanton when she received it, she would have been moved to suspicion, to wonder and even perhaps to panic.

Mrs. Marion Stanton laughed aloud; did a few light steps of a dance the while she hugged the letter against her bosom.

The bait had been taken. Mrs. Blakemore would come. The comedy would be played as little Mrs. Stanton had planned. And then what? What would Howard do? Would he understand?

Marion felt that he surely would. But at

any rate, she was doing the best she knew. Her way of winning him completely back to her, of utterly eliminating the beautiful young widow from his heart and mind forever, seemed, the more she thought of it, to be the only way. It would be unique; startling probably. But it promised to be altogether effective. She had cast the die; she was willing to stand by the turn that Fate would give it.

CHAPTER XI

"A HUSBAND — TO GIVE AWAY"

SOMETHING before the dinner hour of the evening which was marked for Mrs. Blakemore's entertainment as the guest of honor in Howard Stanton's home, the imperturbable Wilson succeeded unconsciously in getting very much on the nerves of his master. The fat functionary was moving with his soft, even tread about the library, fixing a curtain, setting a chair anew and fooling about the fireplace — final official touches against the arrival of the guests.

Stanton himself had entered the room, plainly an agitated man. Ordinarily very careful of his dress, his clothing hung slightly awry on his athletic form, and his white scarf stood in a confused knot, noticeably to one side of the front of his collar. He regarded Wilson's phlegmatic movements with growing irritation. Finally he broke forth sharply:

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Well, go and do something."

"Yes, sir; I will, sir."

Wilson began working noisily at the fireplace.

"Oh, that's enough of that!" snarled Stanton.

"Yes, sir."

Stanton strode over to the fireplace and did not perceive the entrance of his wife. Marion looked cool and lovely in a very simple but exquisite gown of silk that displayed softly yet most advantageously the snowiness of her neck and throat, the delicate coloring of her cheeks, the golden yellow of her spun-gold hair. A series of quick, little clenching motions of her hand upon her handkerchief betrayed a nervous tension equal to that which her husband was undergoing, but by these slight, significant gestures only could it be read. Her gray eyes looked large, ingenuous and quite calm.

"Dressed?" she asked easily of her husband.

"Yes," he said brusquely.

She went over and placed him under close and

deliberate scrutiny. The lack of care, the positive disarrangement of parts of his attire caused her a lift of the eyebrows. But she said nothing to him. She turned to the butler.

"I want everything to look particularly nice to-night, Wilson," she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Stanton."

Wilson, at loss for what further might be done, moved a tall vase about an inch along the mantel shelf above the fireplace.

Marion almost at the end of her ability to hide her nervous anticipation of the events due to happen on this night in the execution of her plan to hold her husband's love, made much ado regarding this slight performance by Wilson.

"No — no — that won't do at all," she declared, and in proof of the validity of her objection, she moved hurriedly across the room and moved the vase back just about half an inch, stood away and commented:

"There! That's much better."

She took another ornament from the mantel, held it the while she seemed in great thought concerning it, and then replaced the vase in almost exactly the same spot from which she had taken it.

"Howard," she said suddenly, "Mrs. Blakemore is dark, isn't she?"

Stanton, pretending to read a book, answered shortly: "Yes."

"Move out that blue-green fire shield, Wilson," said the little woman promptly. "Dark women so love a blue-green background," she volunteered to her husband.

She watched Wilson obey her order, when she said:

"That will do — you may go."

Marion glanced everywhere about the room. She indulged in a sigh of satisfaction.

"I think everything looks very nice," she declared cheerily.

Stanton, who had fidgeted with the book, fidgeted with his collar, his waistcoat, his cuffs, his hair — now watched Wilson impatiently until the man was gone. He slapped down the book.

"Look here, Marion," he called angrily, "what the thunder is this you think you are pulling off?"

"Pulling off?" she laughed sweetly. "A dinner, Howard, to your friend, Mrs. Blakemore."

"Well, I don't approve of it," he answered sullenly.

"Why? Is Mrs. Blakemore someone I really ought not meet?"

Stanton jerked his chin forward above his collar.

"Of course not," he retorted. "But the circumstances — everything —"

"We've discussed that, Howard; I'm doing you a favor."

"A favor?" queried the dumbfounded man.

Marion smiled quickly and nodded.

"Yes; certainly. It isn't every wife who would introduce her successor. Besides, she really ought to meet the family. Don't you think it is so much nicer to be properly introduced?"

The man gasped. He regarded his small, pretty wife in sheer amazement. In the end he spoke thickly, uncertainly.

"Can't you see it will be an awful mess?"

"Why?" She laughed at him. "Won't you be able to conceal your affection?"

Stanton swept his arm out angrily.

"Look here, Marion — I'm not going to be made any one-ring circus of."

"Oh, Howard," she remonstrated. "It isn't a cheap show. Three rings at least. Just you wait and see."

"Look here," he repeated, "I'm not going to have her brought here for the amusement of your family!"

"And don't forget yours," she supplemented.

"Yes, and mine," he agreed.

Marion kicked her train neatly aside, sat in a big chair and rested her chin on her hand.

"Do you really think that it will amuse them, Howard?" she asked interestedly. "Yes; I think it will. I just can see your mother hold her sides with laughter, and as for dad — well, as for dad, it will be the funniest thing dad ever saw."

"Marion," he began in expostulation.

"Do you think they would set foot in this house if they knew?" she asked frankly.

"Well, why in the name of all —"

"Howard, I don't want to humiliate you. Of course not. And I have invited Mrs. Blakemore. I am not going to insult a guest." She arose and went over to him. "Now, come," she coaxed, "you are all mussed up. Where

did you dress?" She made a rapid gesture of despair. "Oh, that tie!" she exclaimed.

"What's the matter with it?" he asked testily.

She said nothing, but drew him toward her and opened the knot and began retieing. He submitted awkwardly and half-unwillingly.

He felt quite helpless. He had felt so for days. Cudgeling his brain to read what form of denouement his wife planned in the matter of her invitation of Mrs. Blakemore, had elicited no explanation that seemed the right one. When she announced her intention of asking Mrs. Blakemore within her home, he had been incredulous. He was also sure that Mrs. Blakemore wouldn't come. Yet she had asked Mrs. Blakemore and Mrs. Blakemore had accepted. Now, as she worked at his tie, he fidgeted physically as he had fidgeted mentally for days, and still fidgeted under the strain of moving about completely in the dark.

"Be still," said Marion in her best motherly fashion. "You act just like a rebellious child having his face washed for Sunday School.." She shook her head. "There'd be no real self-

sacrifice," she explained, "in giving another woman a chance for you, if you didn't look well, you know."

She worked at the tie.

"You simply must look your best," she concluded.

"Hold on — you're choking me!"

"Must look —" Marion paused, her fingers still at his throat; her eyes directly looking into his. "Be terrible, wouldn't it," she said, "if she decided she didn't want you after all this trouble? And how humiliating for me!"

Finishing with his collar and tie, she pulled down his waistcoat, arranged the set of the shoulders of his coat, and went on speaking:

"Oh, you must look your very best, you know," she admonished.

She stepped back. Then she moved forward and turned him around. A curious gentleness and tenderness at moments came into her eyes, belying the light whimsicality of her speech.

"Now," she enunciated finally, "you look good enough for any woman —" she chuckled, "to give away."

"It's awful good of you to take so much trouble," said Stanton rather blankly fumbling

at his white bow. "I never could tie one of the fool things."

"Yes," assented Marion. "That's how I learned."

Stanton did not catch her meaning.

"I know you did." His face lighted. "I remember the first time you learned."

"Do you? Well — I —um — don't recall exactly."

Stanton was remonstrative.

"Surely you remember one night your father coming into the room and it had to be tied quickly."

"Oh," she declared boastfully, "I'd learned long before then. I used to tie Oliver Whitney's ties!"

"What?" Stanton asked angrily.

"Besides, Howard Stanton, when you recalled that you made a gesture as if we had been kissing each other. And I did not kiss you."

"I know you didn't. That's how it came untied. You dodged."

Marion looked away and flirted her handkerchief before her eyes.

"Well," she observed, "widows don't dodge."

Stanton winced.

"Anyhow," he said in retaliation, "you didn't always dodge," and he nodded at her in satisfaction.

She had turned her back partly towards him and now looked at him over her shoulders.

"Humph!" she said. "Well, I'm safe now."

Stanton moved involuntarily toward her, holding out his hands. She stepped quickly back, smiling teasingly; and with mock gestures of horror she warded off his hands.

"Remember who's coming!" she cried. "At least be faithful to your last love!"

Stanton thus brought to a check, looked disappointed and annoyed.

"Gracious!" warned his wife, "what would Mrs. Blakemore say?"

The young husband caught himself in the act of laughing heartily.

"Hang it, Marion," he said, "I almost forgot."

"You're always forgetting. Remember the night you kissed me in the automobile and forgot it was lighted?"

"And you slapped my face."

"Of course, I did. Did you suppose I

wanted to be kissed in public like a Luna Park belle on the back of a Coney Island steamboat?"

Stanton drew away, looking his dainty wife all over.

"Gee! we had good times in that car!" he said, half wistfully.

She did not respond. A twinge of feeling crossed her eyes.

"You're always having good times in automobiles," she reminded him. "And gracious! Howard, we are forgetting Mrs. Blakemore!"

"O, darn —"

"What was that?" she asked but did not press the query. Instead she asked most ingeniously another question. "Howard, do you think Mrs. Blakemore will approve of me?"

"Approve of you?" he stammered. "Why, of course."

"Oh, my, what a relief. Do you know that it is getting to be —"

"Oh"— he paused angrily and looked at his watch. "They ought to be here now."

"By the way," said Marion, "I am afraid I forgot to tell you."

"What?"

"I invited Mrs. Blakemore half an hour ahead of the others."

She scanned the room for the twentieth time at least.

"Well, I'm glad it looks nice. Whatever she thinks of me," she made with her shoulders a little gesture of self-depreciation, "she must admit that I have trained you well for her." She sighed. "This is a dear old room," she continued. "I quite envy you the fun of fixing it up all over again. Is she good-tempered? She won't be as obstinate as I was. You can get just what you want. And,— of course, you'll have your new crest? Yes, crossed hearts above an automobile rampant. She'd like that, wouldn't she?"

"Oh, stop it," he demanded.

But she did not.

"There are a few things, dear, that I would like to take as souvenirs. That vase — you bought it for me on our honeymoon. It's a tall, hollow vase. It will remind me of you."

"Marion," he begged, "have you no sentiment? Think of our past!"

"Oh," she replied. "I have no time to think of the past. I must think of the future. Where shall I go to get my divorce? Rhode Island, Sioux Falls, or Reno?"

"Where is your sense of propriety, Marion?" he put forth in an injured manner.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know, Howard,— lost probably where you lost yours — automobiling."

And just then the door-bell rang.

"Mrs. Blakemore! Goodness!" she exclaimed drawing back from him. In sudden panic, she fumbled with her hair. "I know I look a fright! I'll — I'll just run away a minute."

But at the doorway she stopped. Her eyes glinted as she said:

"You won't really mind my going, of course. And — and what would she think if she caught us alone together."

Stanton looked after her in dazed fashion. But of a sudden he fell to straightening his tie (as he believed) and otherwise preen and primp himself for the advent of Mrs. Blakemore. Presently the monotonous voice of Wilson announced the momentous guest of the evening.

CHAPTER XII

"A HOLY SHOW"

WHEN Mrs. Blakemore moved into the room, her long, fine figure shown to superb advantage by the close-fitting maroon silk gown that she wore and with jewels glittering at her corsage and sparkling in her dusky, black-hair; there disappeared from her countenance the captivating smile which had at first illumined her lips. The expression gave way to surprise as she saw Stanton standing in the big room with no other guests near him, his wife absent, himself altogether alone. She moved forward slowly with a hint of a characteristic indolence that men found to be fascinating in her, and extended her hand to Stanton who, flurried and altogether at sea mentally as regards the proper playing of his part in the extraordinary comedy of his wife's making, stepped forward to greet her.

He was undergoing genuine qualms of dis-

may, fears of the developments that might come and a larger fear for Marion's sake. Though no analytical, keen judge of persons, he had, however, known the widow sufficiently well to understand that beneath her exterior of indolence lurked an enormous reservoir of emotional strength; that moved sufficiently by anger, disappointment or chagrin; conventions and even laws would prove but tissue paper barriers to her actions. He realized that she with her flashing black eyes and crimson, wilful mouth was a most dangerous woman to offend. In his own mind he felt disconcertingly that little Marion was playing with fire, or what was a better simile, he told himself, she was recklessly prodding a tigress and an uncaged tigress at that.

"Charming as usual, Mrs. Blakemore," he said formally, conscious of the butler's presence, as he shook hands with her. And then in a lower key: "It's great to see you again."

Wilson, stolid in body and mind, had the almost maniacally mean curiosity that reigns in the servants' hall, in regard to the doings of those whose bread they eat. If Wilson had kept a diary no little incident of the present

family affair would have been missing from its pages. And he did not mean to allow this one, as choice an incident as any that had gone before and might happen, to escape him. He did not therefore, take himself out of the room but lingered, doing divers unnecessary things with the curtains and other articles of furniture, doing these things silently, unobtrusively and far enough away to escape attention but with straining ears in his head the while.

Mrs. Blakemore scanned the room with lifted eyebrows.

"I fear I am very early," she said. "Mrs. Stanton —"

"Mrs. Stanton will be down directly," he hastened to assure her. "She — is —"

The widow looked at him with significance in her brilliant black eyes.

"Arming for the fray?" she queried.

Wilson did that then for which he could never afterwards pardon himself. He gasped.

His young master's glance struck him sternly.

"That's all right, Wilson."

"Yes, sir," said the butler humbly. Dan-

gerous as it was, he yet did not leave the room. His curiosity clutched him by the neck as it were and led him softly across the room to perform delusionary services at the fire-place. There was a blank silence in the room attending him.

"There's nothing the matter with that either, Wilson," struck sharply on his ears.

"Yes, sir."

He straightened. He looked desperately around the room, seeking some other excuse for staying.

"Wilson," came Stanton's voice brusquely. "Tell Mrs. Stanton that Mrs. Blakemore has arrived."

"Yes, sir."

And this time, slowly, reluctantly, Wilson did leave the room.

Mrs. Blakemore had ensconced herself most gracefully on the big, comfortable sofa.

"What a perfect servant," she observed.

"Oh, yes; excellent."

"Yes," she commented, "I'll wager he knows every time you say your prayers."

He laughed. And then he walked over and looked down at her warmly.

"You do look bully to-night, Puss," he said eagerly.

"You silly boy," she said. "Do you think I should have come otherwise?"

Lazily, encouragingly sensual was her manner toward him whenever she spoke, regardless of just what the purpose of her talk might be. There was a halt in their conversation the while they eyed each other softly, Stanton's handsome face looked boyishly susceptible in its entrancement.

"Do you think Mrs. Stanton will like me, Howard?" she asked, gently lifting her long-lashed eyelids.

Stanton, nonplused by the directness of this speech, sought for himself a chair, sat in it, and waveringly replied:

"Er — ah — I don't see . . ."

She did not wait for the conclusion of the reply.

"Where have you been keeping yourself?" she cut in reproachfully. "What have you been doing? One whole week?" she lowered her eyes. "It isn't exactly fair," she continued, "to make yourself essential and then —

pouf!" she drew prettily through her red lips, "disappear! Besides," she laughed, "I've been dying of curiosity to say the least."

Stanton tried to tell himself that he should not feel pleased. But he was nevertheless.

"I didn't realize that I was so altogether essential," he said.

With eyes intentionally contradicting herself, she answered;

"Perhaps you're not." Then softly, with a glance around for a possible Wilson, "It was your wife I wished to know about."

"Oh, my wife," he said coldly and dampened, his conscience rearing anew. "She's all right."

Then she went back to her former question.

"Howard, do you think Mrs. Stanton will like me?"

The widow found his nods easy to read and she dropped quickly the subject of his wife.

"You do look handsome tonight, Howard," she said musically. "I have always thought that you were about the best looking man I ever saw in evening clothes . . . . always immaculate."

She looked him over.

"But that tie!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"What's the matter with it," he asked and fumbled at it.

"Oh," she said with an impatient gesture, sinuously arising, coming toward him. He arose but her hands were laid upon his hands. He dropped his arms and submitted.

"No — no," she had said, "you make it worse, if possible. You do need a woman. Now — now let me."

And as her fingers lightly wove and twisted where such a little while before Marion's fingers had lightly woven and twisted, Wilson appearing at the door, was thrilled. He knew his duty, however. He coughed. He had the satisfaction of beholding his master and Mrs. Blackmore draw guiltily apart.

"Mrs. Stanton desires me to say that she will be down at once, sir."

Stanton's hand was over his tie, and ludicrously held there.

"Very well, Wilson."

Nor did he take his eye off the man until Wilson had entirely disappeared.

Stanton's hand came down. It was no won-

"YOU DO NEED A WOMAN. NOW . . . . . LET ME SEE"

der he had held it there. Mrs. Blakemore's self-appointed task was only half finished. The scarf drooped in two streamers, altogether untied.

"Please — quick," he called to her desperately, his eye fearfully on the door through which his wife would enter. She did the work hastily. "Thanks," he said in relief as it was done.

She stood back.

"It takes a woman to really tie a tie. That's splendid."

He did not enlighten her.

"Polly and I've have missed you terribly," she said. "Poor little Jim. He whines about the house and will hardly eat anything."

"Good old Jimmy," he laughed. "But you see — I've — I've been — very — very — busy lately."

"Too busy to think of me?"

"I should hope not. Why," he added with enthusiasm, "it's wonderful how congenial you and I are."

"I don't know, Howard. I've met lots of people but you are the squarest and best fellow

of them all. I think at heart," she continued sincerely, "you are on the level. I reckon that's why I like you."

"We do think the same about most things," he chimed pleasantly.

She shook her finger.

"Don't forget our one difference."

He waved his hand impatiently.

"So long as you are married," she said reluctantly, gently and firmly, "you owe a duty —"

He repeated the impatient gesture.

"Oh," he said in remonstrance.

"There will be an action?" she hazarded.

"I can't let you be involved," he asserted.

"Some of her friends have seen us together."

"Yes."

She looked at him shyly.

"It must have been a terrible scene," she observed. "Really, Howard, before this came up, I never properly appreciated your strength of character. I apologized when that invitation came — why little Elizabeth — Puss — just put down her coffee cup"— she acted the intimate little scene as she spoke, and said;

"Elizabeth, you are flabbergasted, you have cruelly misjudged a remarkable young man." She put her hand out and rested it on his arm. "Honestly, my friend, how under heaven did you induce her to invite me to come up?"

"Induce her?" He looked at her queerly. "I couldn't stop her," he blurted.

"Then she knows?" she demanded, startled.

"Yes."

He nodded his head in fearsome affirmation.

She was on her feet. Her eyes scanned him angrily, scornfully.

"What? And you let me come without knowing."

"Er — yes — yes," he was forced to admit.

"How dare you do a thing like that?"

"Well — er — you have often said, you know, that you would like to be asked here," he fenced.

"I — asked — well really," she said bitterly. "Howard Stanton, I'm not going to be made a one-ringed circus of —"

"No — no," he replied equally bitter, "a three-ring circus, at least. She — you — and I."

"Indeed," she exclaimed, acridly. "A holy show! Now, I want to tell you Howard Stanton —"

But she stopped for she beheld Stanton's eyes fixed tragically on the doorway and turning her own gaze in that direction, beheld the small, slender woman whom she knew must be Howard Stanton's wife.

CHAPTER XIII

THE WIFE'S VERSION

WITH his wife and the other woman standing together before him for the first time and virtually for comparison, Howard Stanton saw his wife largely with the advantage on her side. The surprise of her entrance had almost betrayed the graceful, beautiful widow into an awkward attitude, and though Mrs. Blakemore had come with her nerves fully in control, to go through this very meeting, the moment when it came had caught her off poise.

Markedly different were the women; the widow tall and dark haired, and black-eyed and clad in warm and vivid colorings of silk; Marion white, delicately pink-tinted, her head golden, her figure slender, deftly turned, exquisitely lithe in its faultlessly fitting costume of pale blue silk.

Still Marion held the upper hand as she

easily came forward unruffled and with aplomb, extended her hand.

"I am sure," she said in meaningful tones, "that this is Mrs. Blakemore?"

The widow was no social tyro. Her poise was almost instantly regained.

"Mrs. Stanton," she smiled.

"So charming of you," Marion smiled graciously back at her, "to overlook the informality of my invitation and let me presume on your friendship for Mr. Stanton."

Mrs. Blakemore bowed slightly.

"It is really remarkable," she observed, "that we have not met before. I am sure that we must have mutual friends."

"Yes," Marion's tone was altogether sweet and easy. "I have a number of friends in the West now — Sioux Falls and Reno. Probably you've met them?"

Mrs. Blakemore did nothing so obvious as biting her lip. But she nearly did it.

"No," she returned evenly. "I'm from the South."

"How delightful! And — we have met at last!"

"Yes, indeed. I've looked forward to it."

The atmosphere had grown psychically leaden. They all felt it. Stanton put in clumsily:

"Ah — then — then we all ought to be pleased."

His wife gave him no glance. Her eyes were entirely on Mrs. Blakemore.

"Yes; and I wished very much to meet you Mrs. Blakemore for I felt that I owed you an apology."

"Apology?" exclaimed the astounded woman. "To me?"

"Why yes. I owe you an apology for even allowing you to go out with Mr. Stanton in that automobile when I knew that tire was weak and how recklessly he drives. Had you been killed I would never have forgiven myself."

They both stared at her.

"No — er, yes — no — er — you — well you never can tell what will be the result of a trip in an automobile, can you?" babbled Stanton.

Mrs. Blakemore gulped.

"You never can," she answered. And it was from the bottom of her heart.

"I think, Howard," said Marion gently,

" you should have warned Mrs. Blakemore what the result might be."

Stanton was floundering.

" Marion ! " he cried helplessly.

Mrs. Blakemore with the present result strikingly before her, turned on Stanton, declaring significantly:

" You should. Why didn't you? "

He turned to look at her; and then at Marion; his eyes all confused.

" Oh,— I —," he blurted, " How could I know? "

Marion laughed across at Mrs. Blakemore.

" I think we had both better forgive him," she said.

" Well — it's generous," said Mrs. Blakemore.

" Oh, no — not for me. I'm merely standing up for my rights; forgiving is the prerogative a wife never loses."

Stanton tried to wade back effectively into things.

" I don't like that speech, Marion," he said peevishly. " Of course, it's a joke but it doesn't sound exactly right. It sounds as though — well, as though you had something to forgive."

"Oh," she said soothingly. "I am sure Mrs. Blakemore understands."

"I think misunderstandings are terrible things," the widow hastened to say. She looked keenly at Marion. "I have found that the best way to avoid them is absolute frankness — absolute frankness. My friends know just *how* to take me."

"Do they all take you in the same way?" asked Marion with a naive surprise that stung hard, "if they do I'm sure I know you very well indeed, for Mr. Stanton has spoken so much of the charming Mrs. Blakemore. Yes, very often indeed."

"Oh, you have been talking about me, have you?" asked Mrs. Blakemore of Stanton, and against her will a tinge of anger colored her voice.

"Oh — er — ah — oh — yes — yes — sure," he stammered caught again between the crossing blades.

"What did you say?"

"What did I say? Oh, I said you were — er — what — er —," he stopped, grinning fatuously. Then he flashed inspirationally at her: "What do you think I said?"

"The Lord only knows," she retorted feverishly.

He was angry at that. He sought self-justification through his wife.

"What did I say, Marion?" he asked.

"Well, Howard, you were sufficiently enthusiastic to make me very anxious to meet Mrs. Blakemore."

"You must have received a very graphic picture," inserted Mrs. Blakemore. "Mrs. Stanton, I have always admired Mr. Stanton's powers of description and explanation."

Again Stanton stumbled.

"Yes; I can explain anything."

He quailed under the Southern woman's transfixing look. He was left stammering: "Er — ah — that is —."

Mrs. Blakemore went to his rescue.

"It was very good of you to invite me this evening, Mrs. Stanton," she said.

"No, indeed, Mrs. Blakemore," answered her hostess quickly, "I have always felt it should be a wife's duty as well as a pleasure to be introduced to her husband's friends."

And still Stanton persisted in an effort to grace the occasion.

"It rather reverses the old saying 'like me, like my dog,'" he began. Both women took a sharp breath. "No; I mean, like my dog, like me." He stopped, worse off than ever. "No — it's like —it's like — er, what the deuce is it like?"

As his wife had done, Mrs. Blakemore now ignored him.

"It is really charming, Mrs. Stanton, your inviting me — a stranger in a strange land."

"A stranger?" questioned Marion. "Why, Howard, I thought Mrs. Blakemore was the lady I saw you with six months ago at Rector's?"

"What?" demanded the astonished Stanton. "Six months ago! You! No! You did not see me with any lady six months ago!"

"Indeed, I did, dear," Marion persisted. But then she raised her hands. "Oh, how stupid of me! Of course, that lady was a blonde. And, of course," she turned apologetically to the widow; "It couldn't have been you?"

Mrs. Blakemore haughtily touched her own head, clothed so abundantly in its natural sable coiffure.

"Of course it couldn't," she said.

Marion trimmed her sails anew.

"Do tell me about the unfortunate automobile accident. I'm dying of curiosity ever since I saw it in the newspapers." She looked merrily at Mrs. Blakemore. "Howard never would tell me, you know. How did it occur?"

Blankly the other two looked at each other, or at least whatever expression there was in the eyes of Stanton and Mrs. Blakemore became that of horror.

Little Mrs. Stanton had found a seat between them and she motioned Howard to a chair. The widow had resumed her place on the sofa. The wife now looked from one to the other; her air that of strained attention, anticipatory of hearing the most thrilling details.

Mrs. Blakemore decided that Howard looked absurdly guilty and coughed by way of warning. But she herself looked very little more at ease.

"Why don't you tell?" said the widow flatly to Stanton. There was also a challenge in her voice.

"Er — ah — you see." That was as far as he got. Then he slipped out of the noose.

"Oh, you tell it, Mrs. Blakemore," he said. "You know you tell a story so much better than I do."

"Yes," said Marion quickly, "you tell it, Mrs. Blakemore. "I'm sure you're a much better story teller than Howard is." She was dulcet to the limit.

"I — I —" it was plain that the widow's nerves were beginning to play her tricks; "I've never achieved any reputation as a story teller."

"No — really?" from Marion, incredulously.

"Oh, it wasn't anything, Marion," interjected Stanton.

"Not anything at all," said Mrs. Blakemore, for the first time availing herself of a possible cue from him.

"Oh, you are wrong, I know you are. I've never seen such modest people. Here you go through a thrilling adventure that set all New York by the ears and get columns and columns printed about you in the newspapers and then you say it isn't anything at all. Why, I'm ashamed of you. Why," she said, her eyes brightening, "I believe I could tell it myself!"

"Go ahead and tell it, then," said Stanton sullenly.

"Your version would be interesting, Mrs. Stanton," joined in the widow lightly.

"Ah — well then,— let me see. Of course, you had dinner — that little roadhouse — you know, the one on the left-hand side when you leave New Haven. And you sat at that far-off little table in the corner with the vines around it."

"Why, how did you know we sat there?" Mrs. Blakemore instantly realized that her surprise had been tactless.

"Oh, that's where Howard always sits," said Marion cheerily.

"Indeed!"

"And," continued Marion, moving forward in her chair and bringing her hands and arms into play. "And now you have left the place. Five — six miles, with the speed increasing every second. Now, you've passed the fifty an hour."

It was vividly true, this first outline, so much so that Stanton and Mrs. Blakemore were overwhelmed at her handling of the situation.

"Nothing on the road can hold you," continued the little woman, her eyes lively, her voice rising. "Down you go — down that long hill — on two wheels. You are both laughing; laughing with the joy of being together and the

glory of the evening sun is on you and the madness of flying — of living! And then you forget everything. And then Howard leans toward you —"

Mrs. Blakemore started.

"How do you know he leaned?"

"Oh, Howard always leans in automobiles."

"Marion!"

"Oh," said Mrs. Blakemore thoughtfully.

"Then came the crash and the darkness. And when you came to —" she stopped and asked brightly: "Which of you came to first?"

"Er — I don't remember," said Stanton.

"I know I did," volunteered the widow.

Marion clapped her hands.

"Good, I knew you did. I was sure of it." She put out her hand towards Mrs. Blakemore's knee. "Howard always comes to his senses last," she explained.

"Oh, does he?" The widow had not meant the observation to be spoken tartly, but what she meant to do and what her indignation made her do were at odds. "I must really congratulate you, Mrs. Stanton, on your splendid description. It's almost as though you had been there yourself."

"Don't mention it," replied Marion very politely. "But I must not take too much credit. When one has a husband with the automobile habit one gets a good general impression."

"Beg pardon," announced Wilson at the door. "But Mr. Morris is on the upstairs 'phone."

Stanton bolted to his feet. "Morris — good!" said he.

"Howard!"

"Er — no, I didn't mean that. I — I've been waiting for that 'phone message for some time. If you'll excuse me, I'll be back when the others have arrived."

His abandonment of Mrs. Blakemore was complete; his haste to leave the room ludicrous. Mrs. Blakemore was not sorry. As an ally in battle he had proved only half-hearted and wretchedly clumsy and stupid. She felt stronger, more capable than ever now that he had gone. And over the light manner of the two women there came the substitution of a subtle change. They were as skirmishers who, dodging behind trees, had suddenly come face to face upon each other in the open. It would be a direct fight now.

CHAPTER XIV

A MUTUAL FRIEND

IF anybody had told Mr. Oliver Whitney that on this evening as he went to keep a dinner appointment at the Stantons' that he would meet there Mrs. Elizabeth Blakemore, the urbane and well-known young New York bachelor would in all probability have suavely asked his informant to wait a few minutes while he went out to telephone the nearest insanity expert to the effect that his services were needed for a strangely deluded person.

Oliver Whitney knew both Mrs. Blakemore and Mrs. Stanton. He had known Mrs. Blakemore to his amusement. He had known Marion Stanton to his sorrow — yet even the sorrow that grew out of his acquaintance with her was possessed of a certain sweetness and tenderness.

Whitney was a year or two on the youthful side of forty now and mellowness had toned the disappointment which had once been an agony

with him. For he had loved Marion Stanton for eight years. He had loved her, indeed, since she had been the merest girl. Her very youth caused him to hold silence for several years and after that there had grown up between them an acquaintance and an affection on her side that very much against his will and efforts, Whitney realized had only developed into a " brother and sister " affair.

He made his proposal, received the gentlest rejection that a man perhaps ever received, and had gone on loving Marion Livingston just the same. Easy, affable, and with even a reputation for gaiety, Whitney nevertheless lived a life that had its hours of great loneliness, though none ever suspected it, as he fully meant they should not. In going to the Stantons' this evening, he was altogether unaware that Mrs. Blakemore was to be the guest of honor. Only Mrs. Blakemore's invitation, in fact, had conveyed this information. Other invitations had Marion sent out. And these contained no more enlightenment than did his. She had her reason for this. It was an integral part of the plan she had formulated for the defeat of her rival.

Mrs. Blakemore, alive to a strange situation,

was not disconcerted when Howard Stanton and she faced Marion Stanton alone. It took extraordinary moments to spur her on to her best efforts of wit and will. She rather relished now the duel that was on hand, feeling more or less secure from the danger of any outright unpleasantness by the fact that she was a guest in Mrs. Stanton's house. And Marion, small and blonde, and girlish, did not look dangerous, though Mrs. Blakemore was bound to admit that such blades of her steel as had been disclosed had proved to be of fine temper.

Mrs. Blakemore, having laughed easily at Stanton's departure, took up the cudgels confidently.

"Now we can have a real chat," she said, being pleasantly emphatic.

Marion was not nearly so composed. It was, after all, the battle of a novice and an old campaigner. Mrs. Stanton, sure of the merit of her weapons, was yet a little awkward about bringing them into play.

"Yes," she said merely in reply to the widow's announcement that the time for a real chat was at hand.

"I think, Mrs. Stanton," the sensuous, beau-

tiful woman resumed, "you and I should become good friends. We probably have interests in common."

"We probably have," countered the little woman meekly.

Mrs. Blakemore moved forward.

"Let us be frank, you and I," she smiled. "Mr. Stanton has told me that you invited me of your own free will. I appreciate that. I know why."

"Yes?"

The coolness and quiet of Mrs. Stanton's defense was not to the widow's liking. It nettled her somewhat.

"Won't you be frank, also," she returned. "You knew about that unfortunate automobile accident. You knew the *truth* about it. You saw those contemptible, lying stories in the papers. You knew there was some gossip. Your pride was aroused. You were afraid something might be definitely fixed. You determined to forestall everything by inviting me here. You planned a bold, a brilliant coup. I congratulate you."

"I knew you did not in the least understand, Mrs. Blakemore," said Marion quietly.

They sat in a silence that was tense and painful to the widow.

"Then you mean —" she began slowly and incredulously.

"I have been very anxious to meet the woman who was becoming such a close friend of my husband," interjected Marion.

"Why, Mrs. Stanton?"

Marion arose. The first nervousness of encounter was quite gone.

"I don't wish to seem discourteous while you are in my house," the wife continued, "but I am glad the explanation has been forced. I know all about this — this friendship. I can guess what you think. I know what he thinks. And I've invited you here —"

"Mr. Oliver Whitney," called Wilson, at the center door.

And Mr. Oliver Whitney, whose thirty-nine years had not been without surprises, not without seeing strange things happen strangely in strange places, was tumbled completely out of his well-bred calm, as, following Wilson, he stood eyeing Marion and the famous Southern beauty, standing together in an apparently polite and amiable meeting.

"Oliver," said Marion with quick cordiality, and in a tone of pleasantry which in its sincerity marked unintentionally, but very plainly, a difference with the other tones of pleasantry she had used in her talk with Mrs. Blakemore.

"How are you both?" said Whitney with a quick grasp of himself. "This is bully!"

"Wilson, tell Mr. Stanton Mr. Whitney has arrived," instructed Marion.

"Hope I'm not late," Whitney said, to keep the talk going easily. "You know my failing."

"One should always be late for a family dinner," smiled Marion. "To be on time does not show proper intimacy."

In spite of himself Whitney glanced quickly toward Mrs. Blakemore, or rather toward her feet, as he repeated quizzically:

"Family dinner?"

"Yes; the families and you and — and I see you already know Mrs. Blakemore."

The situation was striking in hard at Whitney's sense of humor.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "It is delightful."

In the time it took Mrs. Blakemore to resume her chair, she had also taken on her old nonchalance.

"Yes," she observed. "Oliver and I are very old and dear friends. Don't you remember the last time I saw you, Oliver. You were a true friend in distress."

Whitney pretended to think.

"I — I don't exactly recall it," he said and wondered at the woman's temerity.

"Why," she said casually, quite as if she were discussing the most trivial matter. "I haven't seen you — have I? — since you picked Mr. Stanton and me out of that ditch just beyond New Haven, after we went over racing you."

In all his life Whitney had never felt himself so called upon to mask his face of the real emotions stirring within him. He stole a look at Marion. She had recovered even more quickly than himself and was simply regarding them as though her ears were receiving an ordinary conversation.

"Er — ah — I don't believe I have," said Whitney, very unevenly.

Regaining himself, he asked:

"How are you? You're all right now?"

"Oh, yes; but I will never forget how funny you looked when I came to in your machine with —" Mrs. Blakemore's turn it was now to

falter. She had almost said "Howard"—"with Mr. Stanton holding my hand and you slapping my wrists." She laughed aloud. "You did look so funny!" She put out her hand to his arm. "I don't believe I ever thanked you."

"Oh, that's all right," said Whitney, flustered anew. "I frequently look funny."

Marion spoke:

"Yes. Being a hero does not agree with you, Oliver. You look funny now."

"Do I? Absurd. Why should I?"

"I don't know," she returned blandly. "Why should you?"

There came a cough at the doorway and young Mrs. Stanton looked up and said: "Yes, Wilson?"

"Mr. Stanton," said the factotum, returning from his mission of informing his master that Mr. Whitney had arrived, "says, ma'am, he is very, very busy, and he will be down when the others get here."

It was clear that Howard Stanton once having slipped out of the snare was now a wholly cautious fish.

"Very well, Wilson," said little Mrs. Stanton,

and looking again at Mrs. Blakemore and Whitney. "The man is a fool. He evidently bungled my message. He's a perfect fool, I think, sometimes." She arose, smiling. "Howard would never forgive me," she declared, "if I allowed him to miss these delightful reminiscences."

"Yes," was Whitney's grim rejoinder, "I would certainly like him to be in on this."

Then Marion promptly went toward the door. She stopped to say:

"I know you two will be able to amuse each other," and significantly drawing a chair near where Mrs. Blakemore sat, she smiled at Whitney and was gone.

Whitney took the chair. Mrs. Blakemore said nothing; he said nothing. But much meaning passed between their eyes. Finally Whitney eased his posture somewhat and began:

"Not that I wish to seem discourteous, Elizabeth; but — how on earth did you get here?"

Mrs. Blakemore widened her eyes:

"I was invited as you were, I presume, Oliver."

Whitney's face grew rather rigid.

"Stanton asked you?"

"My friend, Mrs. Stanton, Oliver, dear," replied the widow appreciatively.

Whitney was propelled into an action bordering on the rude. He whistled. It was a soft whistle, but highly significant.

It would have been rude had it not subtly conveyed his admiration. And he smiled and said:

"You ought to forgive admiration, Puss. You're a wiz — you're two wizzes."

"The admiration is genuine?"

"It certainly is."

"Then prove it."

Whitney got up, hesitated, seemed to understand, and moved across to her.

Mrs. Blakemore threw back her head and permitted herself the pleasure of real laughter, throwing up both hands guardedly, however.

"Not when we're alone. I'll take that *tête-à-tête* proof for granted. You see I've had plenty of that kind."

"Well — oh, you mean;" and Whitney having no very clear idea of what she did mean, stopped, looked closely at her throat and said: "By Jove, Elizabeth, what handsome pearls."

"Think so? I like them."

"Stanton?"

She shook her head and looked at him archly.

"Don't you recognize them?"

He came closer, looked more closely and shook his head negatively. "I had them made into a collar — it's more serviceable than a rope."

Whitney dug his forefinger at his shirt front to indicate himself and looked amazed.

She nodded amusedly.

"I knew you wouldn't mind."

Whitney fell back and for several seconds gazed at the pearl collar gently, retrospectively and himself amused.

"Honest," he said. "Was I ever as young as that?"

"Oliver!" she murmured reproachfully.

"Yes, Puss," he said; "you are three wizzes!"

He sauntered away from her, in appearance still retrospective, as an old man might be delightedly recalling the follies of his youth.

"Be very nice to me to-night, won't you, Oliver, dear?" she pleaded softly.

"Well — will I? You just watch."

"I mean," she smiled, "when Howard is looking."

Whitney suddenly fell into a chair. He bent over in the expression of sudden laughter. She was puzzled. He straightened up.

"I wouldn't have missed this for all the world," chuckled the man. "Really, Puss, the only thing lacking to make this affair a perfect success is a Mrs. Oliver Whitney."

"I wonder — er — could that be arranged?"

She had for him in this moment a most seductive glance. And she had spoken quite thoughtfully.

He paused also before he replied.

"I'm sure it couldn't," he laughed.

"Why 'sure,' Oliver?"

"No woman will ever take me," he explained, with merry eyes.

"I don't see why not!" Her indignation sounded very genuine and there was an admiration in her voice indicating that here stood a prize which did not know its value.

"It is perfectly simple why no woman will ever take me," he said.

"And why?"

"Because I never will ask any, dear."

Mrs. Blakemore's attitude indicated that she thought him altogether horrid.

Yet Whitney, sincere at this moment, undoubtedly, was like others, a child in the hands of chance. This very evening, so things had been laid, he was to ask a woman that very thing which he had so cynically declared at this minute he never would ask.

CHAPTER XV

A PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

AT the interesting juncture when Whitney had declared his complete adoption of celibacy, little Mrs. Stanton returned to the library bringing Howard with her. In the progress of her campaign it was quite necessary for her to have a few minutes alone with Oliver Whitney, and even the risk of sending her husband and the dashing widow off in each other's company while she did so, seemed essential. To this end she had gone upstairs and induced Howard to return. He had been reluctant. But she had pointed out to him most earnestly the danger of Mrs. Blakemore regarding his conduct as extraordinary and of Whitney's more or less amused surprise at his absence. So that finally he accompanied her back to the room out of which he had so incontinently fled a little while before.

"Hello, Whitney," Stanton said cordially.

"How are you? Wilson always bungles Marion's messages. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

"Oh, I didn't miss you," grinned Whitney, and the very moment that Marion was wondering just what turn to give the talk that might throw Howard and the widow together while she made an essential ally of Whitney, Mrs. Blakemore herself played directly into her hands.

"Won't you show me your conservatory," said she, thoroughly respectful now of Marion's cleverness and fearful of some new deft attack schemed to be played with four corners. "You've told me so much about your conservatory."

Stanton did not conceal his pleasure at this opening for a new escape.

"Why — certainly — certainly," he answered eagerly, offering her his arm. At just this time Marion watched with satisfaction her husband in the company of Mrs. Blakemore.

"Oliver, will you do me a favor?" the young wife asked immediately, when her husband and the widow had passed out of hearing.

"Of course."

"Will you be very nice to me to-night?"

"Well, will I? You just watch."

Whitney laughed agreeably, but there was an undercurrent of serious feeling in his voice.

"I mean," she said, gazing very earnestly up into his face, "when my husband is looking."

Whitney stood back and looked at her. His countenance still wore its expression of amusement, but nevertheless, the quick eagerness of her manner had its effect of drawing his sympathy instantly.

"Do you know?" he said after a little while, "that something tells me that I am going to be the belle of this party?"

He looked more earnestly at her as she stood there so slight and fair-faced and purely pretty; so altogether sweet and desirable;—the one great thing in his life that had been absolutely denied him.

"Do you love him, Marion?" the man asked her softly.

She did not answer immediately. Although he told himself then and kept repeating the thought that he was absurd to allow his heart to beat more rapidly in the sudden revival of a hope that he had laid away long ago in rose-

mary, yet the hope was stronger than all reasoning and prevailed and soon began to shine in his eyes as he looked at her.

"What is this, Oliver — a cross-examination?" she asked.

"May I answer truthfully?"

"Yes."

"Well, then," he said, without effort to touch her, but standing there with his hands at his sides and his head up, "it is a proposal of marriage."

Marion caught her breath.

"Oliver Whitney," she exclaimed, "are you serious?"

"Now, Marion," he remonstrated, "forget that you are a woman and be sane."

"Hadn't we better both try to be sane?" she laughed.

"I am sane, Marion." He looked at her wistfully and seriously; his handsome, high-bred countenance peculiarly attractive in the manly tenderness that it displayed. "That is why I have spoken — because I have the right to speak."

She drew back from him, slightly startled, yet

without fear or indignation in that she knew he was worthy and had always been worthy of her trust and friendship.

"The right, Oliver?" she asked curiously.

"Yes," he answered squarely; "an uninterrupted, honorable love of eight years has rights. It has the right to come to you when you are in perplexity, in distress, to let you know that it is at your service; ready, waiting, eager to be used in any way that you may see fit. My dear child, everybody who knows us both knows that I love you."

He saw that she was disconcerted at his words; saw that the expression of the faithfulness of his love had moved her deeply. He walked to a chair and sat there with intent to reassure her more or less of his own calmness. Looking at her again he said:

"And I wouldn't have you break the littlest of our silly conventions for my sake. Therefore, I am here ready to do the smallest service or receive the greatest honor."

He leaned forward.

"Do you really and truly love him?" he asked simply.

Her reply was as direct as the question. The

sincerity he could not doubt in the tone in which she said: "Yes; I love him, Oliver."

He looked away. Briefly his face was crossed by the rigidity that holds our features when we are in pain. But when he looked at her again, he was smiling.

"Then," he said, "we must show Mrs. Blakemore up."

"I mean to —" she answered with determination. She faltered immediately. "But, Oliver," she continued, her eyes studying her hands, "don't laugh at me, Oliver — I'm afraid."

"Afraid."

He left the chair and came close to her.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She isn't," said little Marion, shaking her head, "the least bit like what I expected."

Whitney could not quite suppress the amusement that arose in spite of himself.

"What did you expect?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know the sort," she replied with a funny little lift of her eyelids, and with gestures that followed she indicated an enormous coiffure, an over-tight costume and a very superior "perfect lady" air. "You can see

them in certain restaurants and at some first nights," she explained, " and no matter how well they are dressed anything honest makes them seem cheap."

For all the admiration that he could not keep out of his smiling eyes, the young bachelor nodded his head reprovingly.

" Your modesty doesn't do you credit," he said. " For Heaven's sake — did you think Howard would fall for one of the gold-purse brigade? "

" Well," Marion admitted, " I did think she would be one of that kind. I knew he couldn't really care for that sort. I did not want to be jealous, hysterical — and lose him. I wanted to be different — to act differently than my sisters usually do in such affairs. I determined to invite her here, meaning to show him how foolish he was —"

She turned away bitterly, a sudden trembling attacking her lips.

" I thought it would be obvious," she went on, her voice wavering; " and it turns out that the only obvious thing is that I was a fool."

Speaking, the vision had risen in her mind of the tall, supple woman in the fashionable

gown with its sweeping lines, of the shapely head and its dusky black hair, of the well-turned throat and cheek and the scarlet mouth and heavy, handsome black eyes — a woman above all, with the air of the drawing-room as inherent as her own; with not a single sign of vulgarity apparent to aid in the disillusionment of the fascinated Stanton.

"And now you are losing your nerve?" demanded Whitney remonstratingly.

She drew herself together.

"No; I'm not," she said with sudden decision. "She must be that sort at heart — even if it doesn't show on the surface. I'll — I'll —" but again doubting, disconcerting thoughts attacked her. "I — I just couldn't stand losing, Oliver," she said piteously. She passed a quick hand over her eyes. She looked at him certain of his understanding, of his sympathy, of his trustworthiness as a source of encouragement. "I — love — him," she said, a sob sounding in her voice in sign of her deep feeling.

Whitney spoke firmly.

"She's a quitter at heart. Thieves generally are," he declared. "And one thing else — may I give you a little lesson in men, Marion?"

She nodded gratefully.

"When love is dead," declared Whitney, "a man jumps to the opposite extreme in type,—when love is chilled by drifting or lack of sympathy he hunts up someone to give him sympathy; that's all. I think he loves you, child. Put that between your teeth and run off with the race, little girl," he said, and in his earnestness he was closely upon her and put out his hands. Impulsively, she put out her hands to him.

And it was thus that Stanton saw them as he returned from the conservatory with Mrs. Blakemore on his arm.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHOE ON THE OTHER FOOT

IT was no great compliment to Mrs. Blakemore that she could feel the sudden tightening of Stanton's arm and that she saw the expression of sullen resentment that flashed across his face at sight of Marion and Whitney in the position in which they were standing as Howard and she entered the room. Certainly, the picture of intimacy and close friendship was obvious. A jealous man could have only one construction for it.

Mrs. Blakemore put just the right touch of emphasis in her exclamation:

"My, how interested. What is it?"

It was a sally hopeful of producing confusion.

But Marion merely looked up brightly and said surprisingly.

"Oliver was just giving me a little lesson in love."

"Interesting?" sneered Stanton, hotly, for all the effort he made to have his voice sound indifferent.

Marion and Whitney were left looking at each other. Both laughed. The sound of it struck them both, however, as being a little foolish.

"It was," said Mrs. Blakemore with decision.

"You ought to know, Puss," said Whitney with sudden, cool audacity. He drawled the pet name fondly. It struck Stanton as he intended that it should. And it struck him with complete surprise. It heightened as Whitney continued, going over to Mrs. Blakemore, "Marion somehow seems to doubt my ability as a teacher. Will you recommend me?"

"I?" laughed the widow above a quick feeling of chagrin. "I couldn't. How," she challenged, "could I recommend you as a lover?"

"The ingratitude of woman!" cried Whitney reproachfully. He wheeled on Marion, "Well, I hope you are not going to be that way!"

"I promise to remember," smiled the young wife.

The shock of finding his wife and Whitney

practically holding hands found now a repetition with Stanton at the easily assumed, lover-like attitude of Whitney toward Mrs. Blakemore. Plainly, the man had made eyes at her; had indicated a great and deep mutual understanding based on grounds of an old and still lively intimacy.

Mrs. Blakemore felt as unpleasantly about it as Stanton. Whitney's attitude was annoying — so much so that she almost permitted the disgust it caused her to show on her countenance.

"That ought to help some," said Whitney with self-satisfaction, when Marion promised to remember his injunction against ingratitude for tutelage in affairs of the heart.

Stanton was visibly irritated — irritated, Marion saw, almost to the point of some foolish outburst of speech. She said, therefore, quickly to the widow:

"What a beautiful collar. I've never seen such exquisitely matched pearls."

"Yes; it is very beautiful," said Mrs. Blakemore. Then she continued slowly and retrospectively, with the corner of her eye for Whitney as she spoke: "A very tiresome old man gave it to me many years ago when I was a girl.

When men who are too lazy to work and have too much money for their own good, grow old, they nearly always take to some foolish hobby like matching jewels or collecting bric-a-brac. Don't you think so, Mr. Whitney?"

"Bric-a-brac is good," he answered, looking her straight in the eyes. And then, with his annoying resumption of his air of being her particularly chosen cavalier, he offered his arm. "Won't you show me the conservatory?" he asked blandly.

She had no excuse with which readily to elude him. So she surrendered.

"Certainly, if you care to see it," she answered as graciously as she could.

Marion looked after them and Stanton's eyes angrily followed them, too.

"What a stunning looking couple!" the young wife exclaimed, following them with admiring eyes. Stanton did not at once reply.

He looked at her harshly.

"I can't stand that man Whitney — never could," he blurted.

It was all the little woman could do to stifle the exclamation of joy that rose in her throat — a sudden strong sensation of exultation.

Despite his boyishness; despite his recklessness; despite even the wandering of his love; she loved him. She had told Whitney so and it was the confession of what she had been compelled to tell herself when she was brought direfully to face a situation that threatened divorce or separation, at least, had she moved along the recognized lines. It was this love that had strengthened her spirit, given the firm impulse to her mind to refuse to supinely accept defeat; to be strategic; to connive to hold him. She loved him; she would not lose him.

And the black looks that he had cast at Whitney and now the harsh words he said suddenly of a man whom she well know he had always liked and admired immensely, came to her sweetly, as a harbinger of ultimate complete success. Yet she adjudged herself that she must not feel too sure; must not indulge in over-confidence lest the battle should turn against her and the loss strike the more drastically upon her heart in that the danger should have been put out of her mind.

"I can't stand him," repeated Stanton. "I never could."

"Look here, Howard," she returned with

mock indignation. "I don't complain of your friends."

"Of course not," he exclaimed testily. "Why should you?"

"To be sure," she said suavely, "Mrs. Blakemore is all I expected — and more. I'm so glad I asked her."

"Oh, yes," she said with an effort at the impersonal. "She is an extremely clever woman."

She drew away and looked surprised.

"Now, isn't that odd?" she commented. "Now, I thought her more beautiful than clever. But Oliver — he agrees with you. And — isn't it fortunate we invited him, too?"

"I don't see that it is particularly fortunate," sulked Stanton.

Marion considered.

"Oh —" she said suddenly. "Suppose he should cut you out? Still — I have reason to believe that their affair has been over some time."

"Oh — you know all about it — do you?"

"Well, yes; that is something about it."

"Really —" he began in an injured way.

"I don't know that Oliver behaved just as he should," she continued critically. "But,"

she shrugged her shoulders, " men are all alike, I presume."

Stanton had strode toward the window from whence he now looked back and demanded sharply:

" Do you mean to tell me that cad has been talking to you about Mrs. Blakemore? "

She laughed airily.

" Oh, my gracious, goodness, no! " she said with a light flutter of her hands. " We had so much else to talk about."

Stealthily she sought a look at his face.

" Oliver would not talk of it. He's a gentleman. And things are just in the air, you know."

She moved in her easy, graceful way to the fireplace. " So I think it most fortunate that we invited him, too. Everything will be so congenial."

" A very pleasant party," he said scornfully.

" I have enjoyed it so far, I'm sure," she said with great sincerity.

" You and — and Whitney! " he called at her.

She took a place on the sofa and reclined lithely.

"Yes," she assented casually, and then very earnestly, "Oliver and I are old friends — very old friends and — very dear friends. Let me see," she smiled gently, "the first time Oliver proposed to me was eight years ago."

Stanton sneered.

"And the last time?"

She started purposely, as if to speak, then caught herself and finally remonstrated:

"My dear Oliver — Oh — er, Howard, I mean — I — I don't ask you any questions!"

This deft mixing of first names lashed Stanton severely.

"You mean he has dared to make love to you in this house?" he cried furiously.

She regarded him wearily and with a motion indicated her impatience with his anger.

"My dear boy, how stupid of you. Men are all alike."

"Marion," he said, moving determinedly toward her, his face set in rigid sternness, "you are my wife."

She got up and looked him fully in the face.

"Yes, Howard, you are my husband."

"I am not going to permit any man making love to my wife!" he stormed.

She was wholly reproachful.

"Howard," she said evenly. "I have not curtailed any of your privileges. Why should you seek to curtail my —"

He gasped in sheer horror.

"Privileges!" he exclaimed.

"You seem to forget," she adjured; "we may get divorced."

"What has that got to do with it," he expostulated hotly. "That does not give him any right to make love to you, or you to listen. I am giving you the divorce. I — I —" he floundered, "I am doing the transgressing for this family!"

"Well," she said pleasantly, eyeing his rage with happiness storming in her bosom, "I'm glad you are going to assume some of the responsibilities of married life."

Thus confronting each other, Mrs. Livingston saw them as she came to greet her daughter; she and the General and Marion's brother Bob and the bird-like little Mrs. Bob being of the number whom Marion had invited to the curious dinner set for this night.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PROOF OF LOVE

THE sensation of seeing her husband with his jealousy aroused, scowling and fuming over what he fully believed to have been an indulgence in flirtation by her, was so delightful to Marion that she would rather her mother had not come upon them just at that moment. This was something, however, that it was quite impossible for Mrs. Livingston to know and the good lady came forward, smiling and ready to greet them both most cordially. But at sight of husband and wife confronting each other and Howard's flushed and forbidding visage, her mother-love flew instantly to arms. Whereas she began a salutation: "Good evening, children —" she treated Stanton to a chilling stare and resumed, "Good evening, my child. Good evening, Mr. Stanton."

Stanton, unaware of her thoughts, affably shook hands with her.

"Good evening," he said heartily, but as her coldness got into him he stopped awkwardly, and having once before used a ruse of escape successfully, brought it forward again.

"I'll tell the others," he said and was gone.

"Marion, every time I see you two you are quarreling," said Mrs. Livingston querulously.

But if she expected Marion to reward her solicitude by looking dutifully careworn and distressed there was a surprise for her. As a matter of fact, Marion stood radiant, her pretty, delicate face most joyfully dimpled, her eyes shining steadily and liquidly.

Further was there surprise in store for Mrs. Livingston, for her pretty daughter, not ordinarily given to superficial emotional indulgence, rushed at her cyclonically and threw her arms ecstatically about the elder woman's neck.

"Marion," said the dignified Mrs. Livingston. "Marion — what is it?"

She had caught the infection of her daughter's high spirits with that intuitive way that mothers have, and she was beaming back at the girl. Marion kissed her again.

"O, mother — mother —"

"Well, well, what is it, my child; what is it?"

She drew back, clapped her hands and again rushed forward and embraced the white-haired woman.

"O, mother," she cried; "I'm so happy."

"Happy?" demanded the wondering Mrs. Livingston. "H'm! If quarreling with your husband makes you happy, it's a wonder you're not giggling all the time."

"O — O —," she laughed back; "that's just it, mother. It's going beautifully."

"Going — going — what's going, Marion?"

"Oh — my plan. Couldn't you — couldn't you see how he was?"

"How who was?"

"How Howard was."

"He seemed in a particularly bad mood — that is all I could see."

"I should say he was," the little woman said to the accompaniment of rippling laughter. "He was perfectly furious!"

"Well, my child, if it pleases to have your husband furious — why —"

"He loves me — he loves me, mother." She stopped with clasped hands and she ingenuously said:

"It is wonderful, mother, to have your husband love you."

Mrs. Livingston regarded her daughter with a curiosity that was bordering on alarm.

"It's a novelty, anyhow," she agreed. "But this — what I saw?"

"Yes — yes, mother. Why;" her voice rang with happiness in the crescendo, "if you hadn't just come in, he'd have slapped me!"

"Marion," faltered her white-haired parent, "are you crazy?"

Little Mrs. Stanton nodded in the fullest assent.

"Yes, mother; crazy — crazy with happiness." She paused and then of a sudden asked: "When was the last time father slapped you, mother?"

"Marion!" exclaimed Mrs. Livingston, thoroughly horrified.

"Why — didn't he really ever slap you, mother — almost, ever?"

And now Mrs. Livingston, as her eyes rested fully into the big, blue young eyes of her daughter, knew less of horror and more of certain memories that when they came made faint and

gentle blushes steal through her white cheek. And Marion shook her finger at her and demanded:

"Almost, mother?"

"Why — why;" Mrs. Livingston could not keep back the retrospective smile; "why, yes, he did — almost — once."

"Ah!" said Marion.

"But that was a long time ago," added her mother hastily.

"Mother — mother," said the happy girl.

And this time the old woman met the embrace of her child with arms outstretched in return.

When Mrs. Livingston released herself, it was to pat her daughter's cheek with one hand the while she passed her handkerchief toward a suspicion of tears in her eyes.

"Your mother is an old fool," she said fondly. "And — don't you ever dare to tell your father."

With more laughter and quaint head-shakings, Marion passed the pledge.

For all that as she stood there she knew that she must not by any means count the battle won. But surely she held the greatest, most effective weapon.

If he had not shown jealousy, if he had accepted coolly Whitney's apparent courtship in his home before the way had been made open by anything approaching a separation or divorce, Marion would certainly have been left facing despair. To revive a love that conditions may have made dormant was in the range of possibilities; to resurrect a love that is dead she knew well had been in all times a futile task.

Stanton's response to the goad she had applied; the palpable fact that it had not only stung, but stung to the quick, was her revelation that her fight had begun triumphantly. It was not an effort to regain something that she had lost that confronted her; it was the simpler, easier task of keeping what she had.

And as she contemplated the scheme that she had laid; the mine that was now almost ready to spring under the reckless feet of the handsome Southern widow; confidence came to her. She began to believe that before the last guest had departed from her house this evening the struggle would have been won over the other woman, despite all her undeniable attractions, the fascinations of her brilliant personality with its enhancement of sensuous physical charm.

CHAPTER XVIII

OLD FRIENDS

LITTLE Mrs. Stanton, enjoying her rediscovery of Howard Stanton's love for her, had not thought to ask her mother if her brother, Bob, would surely be among the guests, though should he fail to do so, much that she had wrought toward a general denouement that would mean complete victory for herself, must necessarily fail. Whitney's arrival had already served its purpose well, even if it did not further prove as valuable as she had anticipated. Bob's coming was important. And then there was Ned Morris. His presence was equally essential.

In her early sensation of triumph she paused therefore with the doubt arising as to whether or not she would see them at her dinner-table on this night. Further thought convinced her that there was no cause for uneasiness. Surely, if they were not to come, some message must have

reached her by a silver-buttoned messenger lad or the handy telephone.

The first of her misgivings were even then dispelled by the entrance, unannounced, of her big brother, Bob, and his petite and high-strung pretty wife, Salie. Tall, broad shouldered, about four years out of his university, Bob Livingston met exactly the conventional demands for the appearance and conduct of a typical New Yorker of the class of hereditary wealth. He was almost absurdly good-natured in the matter of accepting the bossing of his busy little wife. The fact is, he thoroughly enjoyed it. He was only two months married and far from the period of matrimonial life where he would cease to wonder how this altogether bewilderingly cute and winsome maid had ever come to think enough of him to assume dictatorial attitudes toward his doings. In the way of fond smiles and glances he was constantly rewarding the dainty slave-driver. He was very much in love.

"Ah," said Marion cordially, "welcome to the bride and groom!"

At this Salie made a pretty *moue* of remonstrance.

"Why," said she, "we are old married people, aren't we, Robert?"

Robert had one of his ready agreements to forward promptly.

"I should say we were," he declared emphatically, but nevertheless tinging his statement with a tone of humor that Salie did not fail to notice.

"Don't say so that way," she demanded peremptorily. "You are worse than Marion."

"Yes, dear," he answered meekly.

"That's right — jump through the hoop, Robby," smiled Marion.

Little Mrs. Rob assumed her best authoritative manner.

"As I was saying, Marion, you know — the last time we talked — I don't want to criticize, but as I told you, if you had only started out right." She perked her pretty little head to a side with all the snapping wisdom in her eyes that one may have observed in a sparrow. "Now Bobby and I will never have any trouble in our family, will we, Bobby?"

And she moved over to him affectionately. But she checked the movement. A hasty frown struck across her face. She made a little

darting motion of her hand. Her voice was sharp.

"What is that," she queried, "on your shoulder, a thread or a hair?"

Bob dropped back, plainly scared.

"Oh," she said easily, "a thread."

She rewarded Bob with a look of tender reassurance.

"Yes, dear, only a thread," he assented gladly.

"Bobby," prompted Marion, "put that down in your book."

The flat, formal tones of Wilson's voice sounded. And Marion caught from it a welcome message. There was to be no slip — no absences; there would be none of the essentials missing for the making of her coup.

"Mr. and Mrs. Edward Morris," said Wilson.

Marion went quickly to meet them.

"Ned, dear," she said in her excess of good feeling, "you look handsome enough to kiss."

The dignified Mr. Morris was not without his moments of graceful gallantry.

"Well, I won't fight — cross my heart, I won't," he declared.

"I'll send it to you by Belle," said Marion, kissing Mrs. Morris.

And Mrs. Morris shook her head after the kiss.

"Don't make him any more conceited than he is, Marion. He firmly believes now that all women are running after him. I tell him if he can hold me he's lucky. That's all the Lord provided for one man."

"Well, be careful, dear," answered Marion. "There's a great tendency now to help the Lord out."

Marion observing that Bob had for a moment detached himself from the side of Salie and was looking interestedly at a painting on the wall — a battle picture which he had always admired very much — slipped away herself from the general group and caught him softly by the arm.

"Bobby."

"Yes, sis."

"Some one," she said mysteriously, "is here to-night that will interest you, Bobby."

"Is that so?"

Marion nodded.

"I thought I would let you know in advance."

"Who?"

"YES, DEAR, ONLY A THREAD," HE ASSENTED GLADLY

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"Guess."

"Can't."

"Mrs. Blakemore."

If some person had stolen up behind Mr. Robert Livingston and stealthily inserted a red-hot rod between his shoulder blades it is doubtful if he would have given more of a start than when his sister made this announcement.

The young fellow was aghast.

"Puss! *Here!*"

His tones had been treacherously loud and he hastily put his hand to his mouth by way, as it were, of closing the stable door after the horse had run away.

Marion glanced hastily with him toward Salie. She was afraid that she would overhear but, apparently, she had not. Marion, therefore, turned back smilingly toward her brother.

"Puss," she commented. "How appropriate."

But the shock was still with Bob. He could not for a time speak of the news at all. He simply looked first at his sister indignantly and again toward his wife wildly.

And he repeated the glances again and again. Finally, he found his voice and demanded.

"Marion! How could you let her be invited?"

Marion did not answer his question. She asked him one in turn.

"Do you think," she said casually, mischievously, "she would tell Salie of that romantic near-drowning and your affair last year at Palm Beach?"

Bob's glances toward his little wife grew even wilder.

"If Salie should find out," said the big fellow in hushed tones of fear. "If she should — what will happen?"

"I don't know, Bobby," said Marion unconsolingly. "You'd better put that down in your book."

And Mr. Edward Morris, having observed the excited manner of Bobby Livingston and the keen looks, not to say amused glances with which Marion had been looking at her brother, sauntered over to them. He little suspected what surprising results this mere stroll across the room was going to have. It was only for the relief of an idle moment that he went over to them. But it was to mean many anxious moments for him afterwards.

"What's the conspiracy?" he said with his peculiar falsity of voice when he attempted the lightly jocular.

Marion responded with eyes that twinkled.

"Oh, I was just speaking," she said, "of a guest that I had invited you to meet."

"Indeed?"

"Yes," nodded Marion, "only she is so attractive that she's carried off both Oliver Whitney and Howard."

"Well — well," said Morris with an arch play of his heavy eye-brows, "any woman who can interest that old rake, Whitney, is worth knowing."

"She is interesting undoubtedly," observed Marion, "and handsome — and, oh, many things."

"Who is she?"

"Mrs. Blakemore."

The stout Mr. Edward Morris not only started as violently as Bob Livingston had done, but afterwards he palpitated visibly.

"Wha — wha — what-at?" he gasped. "Why not — not Eliza —"

Marion spoke very distinctly.

"Mrs. Elizabeth Blakemore," she said.

And when that had thoroughly sunken in, she added dulcetly and significantly:

"Puss."

"Oh — aw — aw —" No fat fish on a hook ever floundered more helplessly than the ornamental lawyer and society man was now helplessly and hopelessly flopping mentally.

"Is she your 'Puss,' too?" asked Marion in naïve surprise.

Mr. Morris used his handkerchief. He coughed. He paused. In the end he summoned up a smile and looked at Livingston.

"Er — aw," he asked vaguely, "isn't that the lady, Bobby, you introduced me to?"

But Bob Livingston was bolder.

"Never heard of her in my life," said he sternly.

"Then you must have introduced him, Ned?" said Marion.

Mr. Morris, however, did not heed her remark. His eyes were round and he had them fixed on Bob in a glare of indignation.

"You liar!" he said softly, but most earnestly.

"Come on," retorted Bob, "call me that in front of your wife and let me explain."

Morris, helpless again, made a gesture that might have betokened a desire to compromise, though his eyes remained angry. Bob gave him no chance for a consultation on the subject. He walked as fast as he could back to the protection of his little commander.

Any way, attention at this time focused on the entrance of the straight and fine-looking old General Livingston. There was an affectionate greeting between father and daughter. She caught her mother's hand, too, on the impulse of filial love and drew the white-haired man and woman together. And thus flanked, she viewed calmly the return to the room of the Georgia widow. Stanton walked on one side of her, Whitney on the other.

Marion looked quickly over the assemblage. There was something pitying in her look as she took in the presence of Bob and Ned Morris. But secretly she knew a tremendous satisfaction. The time for her to strike hardest for the retention of the love that was the most precious thing in life for her had arrived.

CHAPTER XIX

OLIVER'S TIE

THE domestic "sky rockets" that Gallegher, the *World* reporter, had thought of as popping in the Stanton household, more than a week ago, were now ready for the flaring by reason of the confrontation that was soon to come of "Puss" with her many "pals."

Marion trembled a little as the situation actually arose and, in fact, was before her. This was no time for weakening, however, so she sped forward, feeling elation almost as she went into action, and called so loudly that the attention of the entire company must be attracted:

"Ah, here are the truants."

Mrs. Blakemore paused and the two men stopped with her. The strikingly, conspicuously handsome woman stood scanning the room queerly. Her heart started an increased rapidity of beating. Her glance wandered wonderingly, uneasily past Marion, past Mrs. Living-

ston, past the old General. She saw young Bob, and she saw the portly Ned Morris. She looked at the other women and then she sought searchingly the face of Marion.

She had come to know that this little childish woman was not to be ignored; not merely brushed aside as a trifling obstacle with the mere claim of wifehood to hold a man's love. She had realized before this that she was the guest at the Stanton home this night to serve some purpose of the diffident, golden-haired girl-wife who looked back at her with such smiling and superb composure.

The dawn of an understanding of the plot was with her now. But she was not of those who cringe, who cower or who run away. Had she been of that sort, the way out was easy. A fainting spell, a mere plea of sudden illness and she might have called for her wraps and a cab and departed. But that would have meant leaving the field. That would have been a quick surrender. And Mrs. Blakemore at this time would undoubtedly have declared that it would be a stupid blunder. Stanton was not as unreservedly cordial and enthusiastic as she knew he could be and had liked to be in her company.

However, there was ample explanation for that in the presence of his wife. The little woman was everywhere among her guests; Stanton had unpleasantness to guard against, suspicion to thwart. The close guard that his wife was weaving or hoped to weave by introducing her into the very Stanton home; into the acquaintanceship of the family circle, was clever, but Mrs. Blakemore could smile at that. Stanton was still malleable; still prone to the spell of her charm, she felt.

In the presence of Bob Livingston, however, and of Morris, she could read signals that she did not attempt to tell herself were not red lights of danger. Stanton, willful, spoiled since boyhood, would bitterly resent being one of any army of followers; one dent in a thoroughly nicked fan of vanity.

Mrs. Blakemore's emotions had almost attained the tumultuous. Certainly they were disturbing her highly. But she merely answered in reply to Marion's accusation of truancy with a most gracious lift of her brow and glance of her eye and an innocent apology.

"I hope," she said, "we have not kept you waiting?"

"Oh, no. Mrs. Stanton, may I present Mrs. Blakemore? Mrs. Blakemore, my father, General Livingston."

At the next move, Mrs. Blakemore was maneuvered neatly in line of vision with Bob Livingston and Ned Morris. These two gentlemen stood arm in arm, brothers in distress. They stood rigidly during the first introductions. Both made almost palpably panicky movements of recoil as Mrs. Blakemore beamed on them.

She showed no embarrassment whatever; no consciousness of a premeditation on the part of Marion in the scene before her. She simply went straight at the men with her hands outstretched, and she called to them warmly as she did so —

"My dear old friends."

That was something more than a "skyrocket;" it might perhaps in its effect be compared to the ascension and bursting of a gorgeous bomb — unexpectedly in so far as little Salie Livingston and the stately young matron, Mrs. Morris was concerned. These two ladies were so far jolted out of their social training as to stare broadly. This woman at a family dinner! To be sure they knew nothing of her ex-

cept that she was dazzingly handsome. But it was enough in that she claimed such extraordinarily friendly relations with their husbands.

Mrs. Blakemore received enlightenment when she was introduced and the ladies names were pronounced. But she did not wince in the least.

"If this isn't delightful!" she exclaimed in lively fashion.

Morris and Bob regained themselves sufficiently to speak, "How do you do — delightful," said Morris heavily.

"How do you do — delightful" chimed young Livingston. A little bird from whom somebody sought to steal a fat worm would not have looked more furious than did little Mrs. Bob.

And Marion turned with dancing eyes from the group to behold Whitney closely beside her, his wise eyes curiously and pleasantly studying her.

"I always said, Marion," he declared softly, only for her ears; "that you were a wonder at getting up interesting and congenial parties."

She made him a little imperative motion of silence. But he went on smiling and asked,

"What's your little game?"

She considered an instant and then looked up brightly and bravely:

"Game? Why I'm having the time of my life playing 'Puss, in the corner.'"

Whitney nodded appreciatively and they both observed with enjoyment little Salie and heard her whisper tragically:

"Bobby — Bobby, you never told me you knew Mrs. Blakemore."

Mrs. Blakemore heard too.

"Oh, yes," she said with an exquisite shading of malice in her voice, "your husband and I are old friends."

"Oh, yes!" assented Bob miserably. And then by way of toning down her vivid use of 'old friends' he asked uncertainly, thoughtfully;

"Er — where was it we met?"

Mrs. Blakemore enjoyingly asserted:

"Why, you must remember — two years ago." She paused and she put tenderness of sweet degree into the reminiscent end of her speech;

"Atlanta!"

"Oh, yes, Atlanta," said Bobby painfully.

"Such good friends," commented Salie icily, "and you don't remember," she pinioned Bob with her glance; "the first meeting!"

"Of the Virginia Blakemores, Farguhar County?" asked Marion pleasantly.

"No," conceded Mrs. Blakemore gracefully; "my family came from Georgia."

Mrs. Belle Morris, a party with the talk that had been going on, supplemented a glance of query toward the widow by observing:

"Surprising we've not met before; I know most of Edward's friends."

"Rather surprising if you had met before, I should say Belle," interposed Marion, sending a shaft that she knew the widow did not escape. "New York is a large place."

"And," said Mrs. Blakemore quickly with guard up at Marion's thrust; "I've been in New York such a short time. You are such a charming hostess," she said to little Mrs. Stanton in her most gracious manner. "One would think you tried to get all my friends—"

"Ah," said Marion swiftly, "this is such a small party. One could hardly expect to have all your old friends."

This time Mrs. Blakemore's wit failed her.

She made no reply. She blessed old General Livingston who stepped forward just then with his old-school gallantry to say:

"We should all be glad, I am sure, that this happy meeting has been brought about."

And Stanton, his face a countenance of acute worry, said quickly:

"Won't you come and see my new billiard table and how I've arranged the room."

Mrs. Blakemore nodded a quick acceptance.

"We'll scarcely have time before dinner," said General Livingston.

"Oh, yes," Stanton laughed. "I'll tell you a secret. We've a new cook."

Marion demanded:

"A new cook?"

Mrs. Livingston joined warmly:

"I can't see why a new cook should be cause for alarm. I trained Marion in housekeeping."

"Well, as for me," declared Mrs. Blakemore distinctly, "I should like to see the billiard room."

The effect of this speech of the widow was not only disconcerting to Marion but brought absolute dismay to little Mrs. Bob and a calm resentment in the breast of Mrs. Ned Morris,

for immediately Mrs. Blakemore announced her desire and started away, Howard Stanton was at one side of her and Bob Livingston and Morris joined her train and even old General Livingston followed. Whitney alone remained behind — his eyes studiously on Marion.

Little Mrs. Bob was beyond restraint.

"I think, Belle," she said to Mrs. Morris, "I should like to see that table."

She smiled significantly.

"So should I," indignantly responded Mrs. Morris.

And together they went.

Whitney smiled at Mrs. Stanton.

"Won't you come, Marion?"

But then he saw that she was trembling; that her eyes were wavering, her hands tightly clasped. Her confidence had suddenly deserted her, had begun indeed to ebb as she saw her husband so readily join the handsome Southern woman in the exit from the room.

"Oliver, you won't desert me, will you?" she said, her voice pathetic because of the sudden feeling of weakness that had come over her.

"Poor little woman," he said quickly, "buck up."

HERE SHE HAD THE WOMAN TO WHOM HER HUSBAND WAS ENAMOURED FACING THREE OF HER OLD ADMIRERS

Marion shook her head.

"What's the use of bucking up?" she asked him, "if she bucks off with him?"

"There; there," he said in kindly, brotherly, fashion; "keep your nerve."

"Nerves!" she exclaimed helplessly. "Oh, Oliver, I never knew I had so many."

Actuated simply by his genuine sympathy with her momentary distress, Whitney had come forward; and in her trouble, in her knowledge of his dependable and honorable friendship she had put her hands upon his shoulders, finding encouragement to go on in what she had undertaken by the feeling of his sturdy, sympathetic presence.

Had she but known there was no real occasion for the doubt and distress that had come upon her. Stanton, once in the billiard room, had looked about for her. It was a pity she had not seen the expression of renewed anger that flushed his countenance when he observed that of the party there were two absentees — herself and Oliver Whitney.

He did not hesitate about instantly making his excuse and starting back to the library where he had left them. His suspicion got new

impetus quite naturally from the attitude in which he found them standing.

"Marion," he called with bitter sharpness; "what are you doing?"

She hesitated for just a little while and then over Whitney's shoulder she said very prettily to her wrathful husband.

"Doing? Why I am tying Oliver's tie."

CHAPTER XX

THE ALL-SEEING EYE

WILSON declaring that dinner was served banished for the moment the angry outburst that was on Stanton's lips when he discovered Whitney and his wife for the second time that night in an attitude that suggested a great familarity between them.

When, a few moments later, the young hostess surveyed her company around the table, it must have been with the same satisfaction that a general looks over his forces and finds them all well arranged for the conflict.

Here she had the woman of whom her husband was enamoured facing three of her old admirers; three men whose memories of her were packed away in the bachelor chests of dead romances and two of the men at least in deadly fear lest the ghosts should stalk in upon the feast. Here she had her rival pinned to the wall as it were by the living facts of her past — here, indeed,

she had the evidence to lay before her husband's eyes that he was only one of many; that he was merely the latest to dangle at the end of the widow's chain.

A more delicate problem now confronted her, however. To lay these facts before him, not by her own word of mouth which he might account as the irresponsible talk of a jealous woman, an effect that would have incalculable danger; but by a tactful arrangement of events to transpire before the party departed from her house on this night — such was her task.

And even while with bright eyes she scanned their faces, her mind working busily with the complexities of what she had to accomplish, the while she graciously performed her duties as hostess; an unexpected element was preparing to invade her home — a figure that she and her husband had forgotten.

A dead silence in the Stanton home had greeted the newspaper reporters since the day when as Mr. Lynch had expressed it, the " story broke." The offices of the Livingston family lawyers and the Stanton family lawyers had been closely watched, efforts had been repeatedly made to interview Howard and Marion and other

members of the family, but as nothing was forthcoming, the newspapers had to content themselves with publishing a few more rumors — rumors of divorce that grew weaker day by day and finally disappeared entirely from the columns of the public prints.

However, the story was too "big;" the persons concerned in it altogether too socially prominent for the city editors to forget the interesting automobile accident or for them to relinquish efforts to identify the woman who had been Stanton's companion when the automobile whirled over into the ditch.

The very secrecy with which this identity was kept by all the persons in the case who might be expected to know it; the very fact that it seemed the most important "lead" on the story and unattainable kept whetted the desire of the news-gatherers to find it out.

And young Mr. Lynch had not been idle. Divers roads of information were at his hand. In the first place, Mr. Howard Stanton and his big red car were very well known along Broadway and Mr. Stanton himself a familiar figure in the big, luxurious restaurants. And Mr. Lynch had speaking acquaintances in all those places.

It came about then that he was able to obtain the name of the tall, black-haired woman who had so often been Stanton's companion in the past few months. This was accomplished with a few deft, bland words to the young ladies at the telephone boards who had from time to time taken messages left at the restaurant between Stanton and Mrs. Blakemore. And Mr. Lynch, tracing the widow, to her apartments was able to gather the facts of her return very late on the night of the New Haven accident and of the necessity that there had been for one of the hall boys to aid her gentleman escort in helping the shocked and nervous woman from the automobile that had rescued her from the road.

Young Mr. Lynch with this information in his keen mind, was therefore to have been found on his way to the Stanton mansion on this night that Marion had set apart for the dinner of the family and the old intimates of her beautiful rival.

The great fireplace in the dining room sent a hospitable glow on the guests and the lights of the candles added to the coziness and soft brilliancy of the fine room's coloring. A great old clock — an heirloom — ticked heavily above the

big, mahogany doors. And for a while its ticking was plainly heard as the other diners generally regarded with amusement the engrossed air of old General Livingston who was bending toward the widow with all his famous old gallantry of manner.

The widow tapped him on the arm and smiled delightfully.

"Come, come, general . . . You gentlemen of the old school are too gallant."

"Now, now," said the general with a beau's wag of his silver-haired head; "that was a secret. You must not let Mrs. Livingston know how prettily I pay compliments. She'll be making me do it all the time."

"Will you listen to that old humbug!" said Marion across the table.

"Do I understand that you really pay compliments?" asked Mrs. Blakemore.

"Why," declared little Mrs. Bob, and not altogether humorously, "he's been flirting shamefully. As a married woman I felt almost compelled to interfere."

The general and the handsome widow joined in making great protests at this characterization of their talk.

Mr. Oliver Whitney arose and rapped the table.

"Being the only unmarried and therefore unprejudiced man present," said he unctuously, "I feel called to the judicial position."

He eyed Mrs. Blakemore boldly and then dryly demanded:

"Now, siren, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Am I allowed counsel?" the widow flashed back.

Whitney allowed his eye to travel slowly to three countenances — those of Stanton, of Morris and of Bob Livingston.

"I dare counsel to appear," he said.

"Dare!"

It was Stanton.

"Why —"

That was Morris.

"I —"

That was all that came from Bob.

"Robert," sang Salie.

"Yes, dear," he said meekly.

Mrs. Blakemore looked at big boyish Bob wickedly and reproachfully.

"And I was just going to choose you," she commented.

The situation had gone beyond that which Whitney had anticipated. So he said quickly:

"The sentence of the court is that General Livingston shall pay a compliment to each lady present at once."

"Impossible!" cried the old man waving his serviette by way of a white flag.

"Oh — general — for shame!"

This was what came to him from the women.

"The condemned refuses," bantered Whitney.

The general arose. He made his finest, most courtly and sweeping bow.

"He must refuse," he said. "The most charming things would merely be the truth."

Whitney threw out his hands, palms outward.

"What chance have we young fellows against that?"

Stanton turned away from the general laughter to receive a message from Wilson. It was evidently disconcerting.

"Tell him I cannot see him," he whispered to the butler.

"Anything important, Howard?" asked

Morris, noting the disturbed expression that had come upon his brother-in-law's countenance.

"Newspaper reporter," returned Stanton. Both men looked at each other, their lips compressed, their eyes alarmed and speculative.

CHAPTER XXI

MR. LYNCH REBUFFED

WHEN Stanton announced to Morris that there was a newspaper reporter outside that gentleman's exclamation of alarm was thoroughly justified as were the perturbed condition into which young Mr. Stanton's mind was thrown.

Both these gentlemen were able to reason that the probable cause of the newspapers again taking up the trail of the automobile sensation must be because they had discovered the identity of Stanton's companion on the misadventurous ride. Other than this question of who had really been the companion of the young millionaire had been thoroughly threshed out, turned inside out, exploited, commented upon.

Mrs. Blakemore might have known the same discomfiture, but at this time she had not heard Stanton's answer to Morris' question. Marion, however, had. And she was as greatly per-

turbed as the two men. For the identity of Mrs. Blakemore to be made known at this moment would surely defeat the purpose of her dinner party, for, of course, it would be bound to lead to an embarrassing situation out of which the widow would naturally seek to escape by leaving the house, in apparent affability, of course, but in all probability with her mind more firmly made up than ever to win Howard Stanton's love, even if merely by way of revenge; to take what the other woman wanted, the woman who had used subtle strategy against her.

Marion was on the point of speaking to Howard, of requesting him to have no dealings with the reporters when Bob said:

"What's the reporter's name, Howard? I know some of those fellows."

Young Livingston, a prominent athlete of his college and afterwards connected with an important firm of corporation lawyers had naturally from time to time had meetings with the men of the newspapers and in return for his innate courtesy, lack of silly condescension toward them and a disposition to genuinely assist them toward obtaining satisfactory results in

their admittedly difficult work; counted many friends among the reporters and had young Mrs. Stanton known the craft as intimately as did her brother, she would have realized that she had been spared much — as much as she could be — by the newspapermen who had been investigating and writing the stories of the automobile accident.

But Bob's statement that he had acquaintances among reporters was not pleasing to little Salie.

"I wish, Bobby," she admonished, "you'd be more careful with whom you associate." "Why," she said incisively, "the first thing you know you will be mixed up in some scandal next."

She was quite unconscious of the straightening of a number of backs, the half-startled expression that came from several pairs of eyes. And Mrs. Blakemore's eyes were of these.

"If I am dear," replied Bob warmly for him, when answering his little, dictatorial wife; "you'll thank heaven I know them. They're the squarest bunch in the world — to their friends.

Marion studied Howard Stanton's face.

"Bobby asked you the reporter's name, Howard," she reminded him.

"Er — ah, Lynch I believe," said Stanton.

"Sounds horribly Southern," said Mrs. Blakemore and the shudder she expressed was far from being merely assumed.

"What is it, Wilson," asked Stanton for the butler had returned to the room and taken his place at his master's side evidently with a further message to deliver.

Wilson replied in a low tone but one that was quite audible to the entire company in the strained attention that he got:

"Beg pardon, sir, but the reporter says that it is very important — says that it is very important, sir, and — and —"

"Well, and what?"

"And that you'll regret it if you don't see him, sir."

"What impudence," exclaimed Mrs. Stanton, senior, with an indignant swelling of her bejeweled bosom.

"I don't know what we are coming to in this country," said Mrs. Livingston less loudly but quite as indignantly.

"Why, it's nothing less than a threat," said

Mrs. Belle Morris and turned upon her husband. "Edward," she asked, "why don't you speak to him?"

Inwardly Morris squirmed. Outwardly he assumed a crushingly superior attitude toward his wife.

"This is something you know nothing of, dear," he said.

"And he is your friend, Bobby — this reporter my husband's friend?" demanded Salie contemptuously.

But Bob again controverted her.

"Yes — praise heaven, he is my friend," declared Bob Livingston.

"Are you going to receive him, Howard?" asked Marion.

There was a general pause. Young Livingston and Morris fixed eyes of forbidding warning on Stanton. They fairly choked with a sudden sensation of gratitude when General Livingston explosively said:

"Marion, you cannot expect Howard to be bullied into receiving such a person. It is an outrage."

And Mrs. Blakemore, seeing an opportunity to join not too conspicuously in the protest,

said with a feeling deeper than she cared to show:

"I think nowadays people of position are too lenient with that class. The papers are plainly taking advantage of it. They are becoming entirely too aggressive and impertinent, attempting to regulate the entire community. For my own part," she said with an assumption of carelessness, toying with the stem of her wine glass, "I make it a rule never to speak to one of them."

She was not entirely prepossessed by the glance that she saw that Oliver Whitney had on her while she spoke. But she finished her speech calmly and without wavering. She even received his drawling comment on her observation coolly.

"Yes;" he said slowly. "I know a lot of people that way."

"Show the reporter out, Wilson," said Stanton. Having spoken the words he felt great relief himself and never in his life perhaps had spoken so few words that had given such complete satisfaction to so many persons at one time.

"Yes, sir," said Wilson, and with equal sat-

isfaction the interested ones watched the butler depart.

"Do papers in the South take such unwarranted liberties, Mrs. Blakemore?" Mrs. Belle Morris took occasion to ask.

"O, my goodness, no!" replied the widow with warmth. "If you don't want anything in," she continued smilingly, "you call up the editor and tell him so and he keeps it out."

Marion joined in the general laughter and then said:

"I think I will leave you gentlemen to your cigars."

General Livingston shook his head.

"I hate sitting around after dinner. May we smoke in the conservatory, Howard?"

"Certainly, General."

The men arose and followed Howard and General Livingston into the conservatory — all except Bob Livingston. The presence of Mrs. Blakemore at the dinner, the possibility of more reaching Salie's ears of the old Florida affair in which the widow had figured as the adored of a fascinated college youth, had put young Livingston into a state of uneasiness well-nigh bordering on absolute dejection.

There was an air of pleading in the manner in which he motioned Marion aside and taking her to a far corner of the room drew her to a seat on a mediæval bench garnered in some European monastery; and there put his case before her.

CHAPTER XXII

A SIGNAL OF DISTRESS

THE other women remained seated at the table while Bob and his sister sat apart, he with a cautious eye always on Salie.

"Marion," inquired her brother desperately; "what are we going to do?"

"We? Oh, no," she smiled. "What are you going to do, Bobbie?"

"But," he expostulated, "why did Stanton ask her here." He slapped his hand on his knee. "And I know her. Something must be done, I tell you. I know her and if she isn't stopped she'll be coming here and coming here and coming here and — and —" his horror was so great that Marion had to bite her lip to restrain audible laughter, "and —" he went on, "calling me Bobbie — Bobbie — Bobbie, just as she used to."

He folded his arms and shook his head miserably.

"Only it won't sound the same now — and soon Salie," his voice caught; "soon Salie will be divorced and — and, oh, Marion, see here, you must save me. You've simply got to save me!"

Marion put forth her hand and patted his shoulder reassuringly.

"Poor boy," she said. "You're in a blue funk. Oh, I know, I've watched Salie and you since her introduction to-night to Mrs. Blakemore, and Salie has been putting you through the bride's third degree — you've been over the jumps."

"Yes; all that's true, Marion," said Bobbie bitterly. "That is what she's been doing. But I don't see what help there is in that for me — your knowing I've been on the grill in the last hour and a half."

"She once told me," pursued Marion, "of those two evenings of miserable happiness that she spent with a wet handkerchief forgiving you stuff you confessed about your terrible past — fake stuff it was Bobbie — and if she finds out this real thing!"

"But why did you let him invite her here?" reiterated Bob indignantly.

"I didn't let him," she answered.

"Well,— well, anyway, you could have prevented it."

Marion drew her hand away from her brother's shoulder and leaned back and asked:

"I suppose you mean why didn't I tell Howard of your affair a year ago at Palm Beach?"

"Yes,— exactly; that's just it."

Marion put up both her hands and made with her eyes a further pretense of being horrified.

"Bobbie," she demanded; "How can you? Don't you remember? I gave my solemn word not to say anything about it. You've never released me from that promise. I couldn't tell Howard, anyhow," she said incisively and with purpose of which Bobbie did not know; "with men I've noticed the best way is to let them find out for themselves."

"Very well, then there's only one thing to be done," said Bobbie, hopefully. "I release you from that promise. You must tell Howard."

But Marion, who had brought the conversation to just such a development, had in doing so an entirely different idea in mind.

"Oh, no," she said shaking her head, "you must tell Howard."

"I — I — but, oh, Marion," Bob was fairly twisting in his chair. "You know *him* so much better than I do."

"But," said Marion; "you know *her* better than I do."

She waited anxiously then for what he would say. For the moment was a crucial one in the complete working out of the strategy she had planned for the reclamation of her husband's love — that the account of Mrs. Blakemore's numerous affairs, the generality of her favors, should reach her husband's ears through other voices than her own.

She did not receive assurance at once. Bobbie thought heavily with wrinkled brow for several seconds but when in the end his eyes turned instinctively in the direction of Salie, his mind was made up.

"Very well," he said, with a sigh as of relief over the decision made; "I'll tell him. I'll tell him to-night.

Marion felt her heart increase its throb with a sensation of elatement. It was not the first time that it had on this night. She hoped devoutly that in the end it would beat harder than

ever with the certain knowledge of the victory wholly won.

Bob arose. He shot his cuffs. He half started forward. Then he came back. Evidently his decision had taken much off his mind for he found the heart to grin now when he observed.

"Sh — sis, here comes old fat Morris. He's the good thing. I introduced him to her in Washington — thinks she is an angel." He gazed at the portly lawyer commiseratingly. "Poor sucker," he said inelegantly, but forcibly.

Mr. Edward Morris, as a matter of fact, was suffering much of the same uneasiness as had brought Bob Livingston to the point where he decided Howard must be told of his old romance in an effort to keep the widow from becoming a familiar in the Stanton household and in that manner seeing much of Salie and perhaps recounting things that would — the young bridegroom felt very sure it would — prove utterly destructive and disastrous to the principal love affair of his life — that of himself and his wife.

Mr. Morris, his own matrimonial ardor much

cooler, was nevertheless as fully concerned for what might happen if his wife, Belle, and Mrs. Blakemore should become intimate, or if in any way the facts regarding certain tender scenes in Washington got to her ears.

He had been genuinely dismayed therefore to observe that of the men in the smoking-room, Bobbie Livingston was not among them. What if Mrs. Blakemore on the one side and Belle on the other, her suspicions aroused by the introduction early in the evening when the widow had made it plain that at some time in his life he had been a friend on terms of intimacy with her — what if with Belle questioning and Mrs. Blakemore collaborating the two skillful women drew out of helpless Bobbie sufficient to open the eyes of Mrs. Morris. Of course, there never had been anything — never anything — and Mr. Morris coughed to himself as he reviewed the matter in his legal mind — never anything that would really justify any legal action on his wife's part. It had never been as bad as that. But Belle was nevertheless a jealous woman. And who can tell what a woman will do? Who could say whether Belle might not take it into her head to make a mountain of

scandal out of a mere mole hill of flirtation? Life as it was, was very agreeable to Mr. Morris. He had been quite penniless himself, save for the scant earnings which had rewarded the first years of his practice of the law. But out of these scant earnings he had been as liberal as possible with his tailor and he had burned devoutly the incense of conformity to all the niceties of the conventions of society and though neither brilliant, surpassingly handsome, nor, in fact, having any marked achievements or accomplishments or great promise — he had nevertheless fitted acceptably into the smart world, was admitted to good clubs and good houses and finally had accomplished his secret ambition. He married money and position — a lot of the first and a very acceptable quality of the latter. Nor had he been forced to accept an ugly duckling in the process. Mrs. Belle Morris was handsome, with grace and stateliness of figure. Mr. Morris had done very well. He therefore looked with consternation on any threatened pouring of troubled waters upon the smooth, rich and yellow sands of life where he walked with so much dignity and self-satisfaction.

CHAPTER XXIII

MORRIS ENLISTED

MR. EDWARD MORRIS was much relieved when he returned to where the women were, to find that Bobbie had not fallen into the clutches of Belle and Mrs. Blakemore but was earnestly talking to Marion. It was plain, however, that their talk was not of a usual character. He happened also to see the face of Salie and she looked piqued to the point of anger. This was partly due to Bob's five minutes of desertion of her and to the presence of Mrs. Blakemore. Her glances toward that lady were far from affectionate. Morris seeing this, wondered if — if — and then he caught sight of the face of Belle, his wife. It was calm. She even looked at him and smiled.

He felt better. She did not know. Nothing had happened. Bob hadn't talked. Nevertheless, he walked over to Marion and young Liv-

ingston and when he had reached them, said in confidential tones:

"You two seem always to be conspiring. What is it this time?"

"Nothing to alarm you," replied Marion quietly. "Don't look so worried."

"I — worried?" he asked in his best manner of superiority.

"You look as worried as a baby with a sore-tooth," said young Livingston with enjoyment. "Honestly, Ned, you look all in. What have you on your mind?"

"On my mind?" he answered gravely. "Nothing."

He frowned at the consequent laughter of Marion and Bob.

"No one ever accused Ned of having anything on his mind," said Marion with mock indignation.

Bob laughed in the face of Morris' wounded dignity and drew off.

"All right, Marion," he said, "I'm going for a smoke. I'll remember, Marion," he reassured her on departing.

Morris looked after him unapprovingly.

Then Marion jolted him by saying:

"Hadn't you better confess?"

"Confess?"

"As to what is worrying you?"

"What makes you think I have anything to confess?"

"I don't think."

"You don't think? You mean to say that —"

"Yes; I mean to say that I don't think, Ned, because, I know."

Morris moved over and took a seat where Bob had been. It occurred to Marion that there was something amusingly appropriate in the fact that it was a monastery chair on which he sat. It rather suggested the confessional.

"I don't understand," said Morris, but the manner in which his eyes sought out Belle as she sat in the group with the other women plainly indicated that he fully understood.

However, this mere bringing the thing to his mind was not the achievement Marion sought.

"Do you remember the army and navy game last fall?" asked Marion.

Morris was honestly mystified now.

"The army and navy game?" he inquired. "Why, no; I didn't go."

"Of course, you don't remember it, and of course, you didn't go."

Marion's voice now went down almost to a whisper.

"I remember very well that you did not go and that Belle was crazy to go and that you couldn't take her."

"Well?" asked Morris.

"You were too busy with a 'client'—"

Little Marion lingered mischievously on the last word.

Morris drew himself up on the big bench.

"Ah — yes; I remember; I was very busy at the time — ah — very, very busy that day."

His sister-in-law laughed.

"What makes you think I was not?" he asked.

"O, indeed, you were," she assented heartily. "What an absorbing profession the law is. After the game; in the Walton —" she paused and the mention of the hotel name visibly affected Morris, "I sat three tables behind you and your client, and we never saw you that day

and I doubt if you saw us at all any time that day. How do you concentrate —"

Morris threw up his hands. He stood up. He shot a swift look toward Belle, reverted his eyes to the fire-place, tugged with his teeth an instant at his closely cropped mustache and finally, with a hand wave that figuratively held a white flag, for it was a gesture of surrender, he said, or rather fearsomely whispered:

"But if you guessed everything, why — why, Marion, did you let her come and — me come?"

Marion shrugged her shoulders lightly.

"I didn't think it would do any harm," she said.

"Well,— well, now you see, that it will."

"How?"

"I don't know," said Morris. "But — well, what's going to happen?"

"Ah," said Marion wisely, "I see. You think that if she isn't stopped she'll be coming here, coming here, coming here and calling you, Ned — Ned —" very sweetly — "Neddie, just as she used to do — only it won't sound the same — and soon Belle will hear of it and Belle will get a divorce."

Marion's adaption of Bobbie's plaint proved highly effective.

Morris clasped his hands at his sides; his face whitened.

"Good God," he was startled into exclaiming. "Oh, Marion, Howard must be told. He simply must be told — must be told," he went on in his excitement.

"Who's to tell him? Mrs. Blakemore?" asked Marion.

"Why —"

"Because if that is what you expect, I hardly think it is likely that she will."

He looked closely at her, biting nervously at his mustache again.

"You mean then that I must?"

She tried to hold down her earnestness. She spoke carelessly and lightly:

"Just as you feel about it. Of course, if you'd rather have Belle find out."

Morris put up his hand with a hasty, despairing gesture — put up a hand to stop her speaking.

"I'll tell him," he blurted. Then being one that would rather not be considered selfish under

any circumstances, being one anxious to stand well in the eyes of others and having a pleasantly ready mind to twist all things that he did into its most favorable appearance, he added: "After all he should understand — it is only right that he should not be left in the dark — that he be given an opportunity to know, er — to —"

"Yes;" said Marion firmly, "I count upon you making him understand."

"And, Bobbie," he said retrospectively; "well, Bobbie knows nothing."

"Bobbie?"

"He introduced me, don't you see? Of course, he — why — he," Morris lifted his eyebrows. "Why to her — he was a child."

"Oh," said Marion. "He — he introduced you — he was the good thing — he thinks her an angel from heaven — poor —"

"He doesn't even suspect the truth."

"I'm sure of that," agreed Marion, unable however to repress a start of amusement in her eyes.

"Of course," said Morris heavily with a tinge of self-exaltation, "a woman like Mrs. Blake-

more cannot be interested in the antics of raw boys."

"Of course not," agreed Marion, liking the sensation of seeing him turn around on her finger; "To interest her it requires a man of poise, a man of dignity, experience, brain, substance, of weight — one like yourself, for instance, Ned."

"It is wonderful," said Morris expansively, "how congenial she and I are."

Oliver Whitney, more than suspecting the purport of the interviews that Marion had had with her brother, and was now having with Morris, sauntered toward the two as they stood there. He was able to read deftly in Marion's eyes that he was not arriving too — that his coming was not going to thwart her purpose. So he came forward easily.

"Ah, Oliver, have you come to confess, too?"

He laughed.

"Why, no;" he answered. "Has Morris confessed?"

"Absurd — confess?" uttered Morris. "Why how ridiculous!"

"Yes,— very ridiculous Ned," said Marion.

Whereat the pompous young gentleman grew greatly confused and said a little unsteadily;

"Well, I'll be going, I guess. Er—" he looked toward Marion significantly. "I wish to speak to Howard. He's still in the conservatory undoubtedly."

"He's a — with Mrs. Blakemore," volunteered Whitney.

"Well — well, I'll go anyway, I'll see him when he's through."

There was a movement on the part of the group of women, Mrs. Livingston announcing to her daughter that they wished to look over some engravings that Marion had purchased only a few days before.

And with their departure Marion and Whitney were left standing alone.

They had hardly been standing thus two seconds before that young man received a highly astounding request from the wife of Howard Stanton.

CHAPTER XXIV

"LOVE ME"

MARION, as she became aware that she and Whitney were alone in the room, decided that the opportunity was good for asking him to go further in favoring her than she had ever done before, though when Whitney discovered the nature of the request he would certainly not call it — favoring — her. Anyway, it was only going to prove a mere artificial realization for him of that for which he had longed, but which he had resigned himself to believe he would never attain: the place of Marion's lover. Since her marriage he had, of course, entertained no such dishonorable hope. But the love he had borne for her was too deeply ingrained in his heart and soul for dismissal. It would be there with him, he knew, when he died.

Marion was not altogether without some selfishness in asking him to do what she presently did ask him, but she knew he stood willing to

make any sacrifice for her, and if in her woman's way she used him, she knew that he would not hold her blameworthy.

"They are all in it, Oliver—" she remarked slowly; "Howard the worst of all, I guess."

"Yes," he said for want of ready words of comfort. This polished man of the world found himself peculiarly inapt with words sometimes when in the presence of the woman whom he loved.

"And I'm miserable," said Marion. Only to Whitney, sterling fellow that she understood him to be, would she have shown her pain — to him and, perhaps, to her mother. But her white-haired parent could not help her now. It was not a situation with which the gentle old lady could have coped or could have aided. In Marion's place herself she probably would have been in her boudoir with wet eyes and smelling salts. This modern young woman's way was, under the circumstances, proving to be decidedly different.

And when she had confessed her wretchedness, Whitney said quickly:

"How can I help you?"

"Love me," she said pathetically and so earn-

estly that he was dumbfounded. The plea was so sudden that he did not think of what motive might be behind it. He could only breathe quickly and ask:

"Marion, do you mean that?"

She smiled into his amazed face. And then she shook him by the shoulder.

"Pretend to, I mean,— don't be stupid," she answered in the old tone of banter that he loved so well, but this time he heard it ungratefully. "You promised to help me before dinner," she said, her face lowered and her eyes raised prettily into his for assistance and sympathy, "and you haven't done a thing yet."

"Oh," said Whitney, with dawning understanding in his eyes.

But he simply stood there and Marion laughed at him.

"You are not so very complimentary — not so very eager," she remonstrated. "Would it be so hard, Oliver," she said further, "to love me for a little while?"

Whitney put his hands behind him and grinned broadly.

"Go as far as you like," he said; "don't mind me."

"You are a dear, Oliver," she said in her deliciously friendly way. "You must make him jealous. If he is jealous I'll know he cares — if he doesn't —" She laid both her hands on his shoulders. "Oh, I couldn't stand it, Oliver, if he doesn't. Oh, you must make him jealous."

Whitney winced for an instant, but presented a wholly resolute face to her.

"Well, let's get this pretend business started," he smiled and put his arm around her waist. His own heart began bounding then, rapidly. He wondered if she thought that it was very hard for him — harder than it had ever been since the time he had asked her to be his wife and she, by force of not really loving him, of only liking and admiring him a great deal, refused — whether she took any stock at all of how he must feel now with his arm about her and yet knowing that she didn't care.

Perhaps Marion felt something of his trembling, perhaps she realized that in this moment she was putting a temptation on the man that in its physical aspect alone might prove unbearable or rather too great for him to bear, might betray him into an embrace for which he could hardly be held accountable. So that when he

placed his arm around her waist, saying "Dearest," she gently disengaged it and shook her head reprovingly and said to him:

"Not until Howard is present to see, Oliver."

"Oh," he answered a little bitterly, "so I'm to make a show of myself for Howard — that's the idea."

It was a rather brusque way of putting it, but, after all, that was the truth of the matter.

"Well," said Marion apologetically, "I guess, Oliver, that's the idea — and for her — for Puss, too."

"Puss?"

"Why," asked Marion in feigned astonishment, "don't you call her Puss? Everybody else does."

In the very instant that the words were on her lips she further astonished Whitney by moving swiftly toward him.

"There he is now," she whispered quickly, and then turning her face upward so that her eyes looked with great tenderness into his, she said:

"Oliver, dearest."

She had signalled the presence of Howard Stanton. He had entered the room in a discon-

solate fashion, lounging along as he came. But he stood up straight enough now. He trembled and he glared. And held his hands tightly at his sides.

The blow struck home hard. Hitherto, the affair of Mrs. Blakemore had only presented the aspect of Marion righteously indignant, Marion tremendously annoyed, perhaps a little jealous. He was not sure of the last. She had not done the usual thing when the automobile accident had disclosed the presence of Mrs. Blakemore in his life — she had not gone home to mother. Indeed, he was utterly at a loss to account for her conduct since. Vaguely he rather resented the way she had taken the whole affair as being not quite the proper thing on her part. As it happened it seemed to be letting him off more easily than he deserved, but for all that the whole idea was so strange of her inviting Mrs. Blakemore to the house. What on earth could be her reason for bringing the woman to the house at all, he had not been able as yet to fathom. Of course, he understood his wife as being too well-bred to have Mrs. Blakemore there as a guest and then openly insult or slight her. In a hazy sort of way, he believed that his

wife wanted to bring some form of an understanding out of the meeting; though what it might be, his mind could not formulate.

But that Marion was in love with somebody else! That was a stinging revelation. He was almost tempted to rub his eyes — wondering if he had gone out of his mind and become illusionary.

There certainly stood Whitney, tall, well-knit, finely dressed, clear-cut of features, the stamp of poise, intelligence and force of character all over him. And there looking fondly into the man's eyes was his, Stanton's, wife.

Slowly the blood of anger mounted into his cheeks, set his forehead aflush and his anger further shown fiercely from his eyes.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TEST

STANTON making his entrance and seeing Whitney and his wife in an attitude of endearment, had as a matter of fact been leading the way for Mrs. Blakemore. But she had stood by his side quite neglected from the instant that he had perceived Marion with her arm extended to Whitney and her eyes looking so tenderly into the other man's face.

Mrs. Blakemore was not without perception. She read that in his face when he confronted this spectacle which set many doubts arising in her own mind regarding the hold she had on this handsome young millionaire. The trembling of his body, the straightening of it, the hot flush of anger — she saw all these things. Yet she knew men too; knew their nature not to want to give up what they possess, even while they may have ceased to care for it; knew the double value that they put upon the inviolate character

of their own honor in such affairs as against that which they should show toward the other sex.

It was she who led the way to a nearby lounge, with her finger to her lips to caution him to silence; causing him to act the character of a spy more or less without realizing what he was doing, or if any scruples did come, he probably felt that here was a case where he had absolutely the right to be an eavesdropper.

"Oliver, dear," went on Marion, conscious of the presence of both, "has the thought that I may be free soon quite taken away all your powers of speech?"

This she said for them to hear. But to Whitney she said in the merest whisper: "That's pretty good for a starter — follow up."

Whitney had been summoning his wits; formulating the trend of the ardent talk that he was expected to deliver. He answered nobly to Marion's command.

"How can I speak," he half sobbed ecstatically. "Oh, to suffer and struggle hopelessly all these years and then to find myself near the goal of my ultimate desire — it almost overwhelms me."

Perhaps a half-realization that much of his

speech was true lent aid to its impassioned tone. It certainly rang forth most genuinely.

"Ah, dearest," he supplemented. And he clasped her hands and pressed them strenuously.

He put his face close to hers so that Stanton thought that he was on the point of kissing her there and then.

But he did not. Instead he whispered:

"I guess that's going some."

"Oliver," she cried back at him passionately, "don't urge me, dear. Remember I am still married. Don't press me too hard."

And under her breath she said:

"Why did you let go my hands, you idiot. You're not pressing anything."

Stanton had involuntarily arisen. His face was more than ever beclouded. He was positively wild with anger. He was restraining himself by the most tremendous effort.

"Look — look," said Oliver, regaining her hands and gazing into her face; "look at me. Can you not see the love expressed there — can you doubt your eyes?"

"I won't stand this," muttered Stanton, presumably to his companion but really to nobody

in particular. It was merely an involuntary expression of his mental attitude.

"Sh," said Mrs. Blakemore. "Look."

The scene was naturally affording her delight.

"How soon can the divorce be secured, dearest," Stanton heard Whitney say with throbbing earnestness.

"I tell you," declared Stanton to Mrs. Blakemore. "I'm going to break his neck — talking that way to my wife!"

"Why —why — it's splendid, dear! Listen," urged the widow.

"Splendid — nothing," snorted Stanton.

He would have arisen if her hand had not firmly caught his arm and held him to the chair.

"If it had not been for that automobile," was the next thing that Stanton heard and it was Marion who was talking, "I might have drifted on to the end of my days and never found out what I really thought."

"Oh, that — that — blessed automobile accident," said Whitney joyfully.

"You are so — so good, Oliver," said Marion softly, tenderly, sweetly.

The detaining hand of Mrs. Blakemore could

hold Stanton no longer. He shook it off with a cry of rage and stormed along the room to where Whitney and his wife stood.

"This disgraceful scene has been going on long enough," he bellowed.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE DISCARD

IN the course of his wealthy bachelorhood Oliver Whitney may have fallen into a blase inertia regarding the affairs of life, and his own in particular. Few tasks or fads really interested him. Nevertheless it was the character of the man that whatever he did attempt to do he did extremely well. In this case it was acting and Marion Stanton could have no fault whatever to find with her " leading man " in the manner in which he now carried out the part of the surprised lover confronted by the angry husband.

As Stanton's cry of denunciation shot across their ears Whitney fell back, first showing signs of dismay, then deliberately bracing himself and facing the irate husband, after the fashion of a man who has clearly been caught, but intends to brazen out the matter.

" Stanton ! " he cried.

Marion aided in the scene very cleverly herself. Her apparent confusion had all the necessary realism — the flutter of her hands, the quick bowing of her head, the rapid shifting of her eyes.

"Oh, Howard," she said and for a time seemed unable to speak further. She concluded weakly: "I — I — were you out there? Oh, I didn't know that —"

Stanton walked toward them with a heavy stride. He looked at her with all the indignant fury that was storming in his mind. "I have been here," he said with bitterness and slowness, "since the beginning of this disgraceful scene."

He cast a contemptuous glance at both.

"At least," he said, "I hope that it was the beginning of the scene."

Whitney, as if unconsciously, drew further away from Marion and his air continued to be that of the guilty caught in the act.

"I — a — a — why, we thought you were with Mrs. Blakemore."

The stealthy thrust did not pierce Stanton's understanding.

"Yes," said Marion, "we thought that you were surely with Mrs. Blakemore."

This time the allusion told a bit. But Stanton was nevertheless too angry to allow this reference to his own shortcomings to affect the manner in which he felt toward finding his wife practically in the arms of another man, and that man Whitney of all others.

He stood for a little while with clenched hands. It was on Whitney finally that his rage vented itself.

"Whitney," he demanded, "how dare you make love to my wife?"

Whitney thrust his hands in his pockets, lifted his head and brought his eyes absolutely on a level with those of Stanton.

"Stanton!" he called back angrily and belligerently, "your wife? Our wife!"

Stanton moved up to him with a clenched hand drawn back.

Whitney waved a nonchalant hand at him.

"Oh, you can't have 'em all, you know," he said tartly.

Marion went over to her husband then and plucked his sleeve. He drew his arm away with a jerk. But she put a warning finger to him.

"At least allow Oliver the discard," she said deftly.

Stanton's first answer to this resembled a roar of pain and anger.

"You, Marion," he cried at her. "You can say that — you, Marion, my wife?"

She nodded strongly in the affirmative.

He passed his hand shakily over his forehead.

"I can't understand it," he spluttered. "I sat there — I could not credit my ears!"

He walked up and down the room several paces.

"In my house — you — my wife!" His face had become distorted with the stress of emotion he was undergoing as he spoke, his words vividly recalling the scene to his mind. "In my house," he repeated; "you — my wife — forgetting herself — forgetting me! — answering the love speeches of such a man — bringing him into this house — such disgrace!"

He flung out his arms at her and demanded:

"Have you no shame?"

Then he turned fully upon her accomplice.

"And you, Whitney — you — my friend! How have you repaid me!"

He stopped utterly at a loss to fashion into words the tumult of bitterness and wrath that was surging in him.

And while his back was toward her, Marion was delightfully signalling to Whitney her complete assurance that the angered man really loved her, her infinite delight at the tremendous anger he was showing; her new confidence that everything was coming out as she had not only planned, but as she fervently hoped.

She might have found added delight to be sure, if she had noted the absence from the room now of Mrs. Blakemore. That handsome woman had looked with something akin to dismay upon Stanton's outbreak. It was becoming forcibly impressed on her that while she might be exercising an infatuation over the stalwart young millionaire, his wife had been by no means completely ostracized from his heart. The eviction of Cupid there, she could see was by no means complete. And not knowing exactly what Stanton might say or do under stress of his anger, what flat statements concerning his plans in regard to herself that might be forthcoming from his lips under the sting of the scene which he had witnessed between Oliver Whitney and his wife, Mrs. Blakemore had decided that this room was no longer a pleasant or comfortable place in which to remain. She had

arisen softly and with a parting look at the trio, sidled away.

Stanton now walked away from both Whitney and Marion. He wheeled again and faced them as he declared with writhing lips:

"My friend and my wife in my own house. I brought you here, Whitney — I welcomed you — I trusted you — and this is how you have betrayed my trust — my friendship! Have you no manhood?" he snarled at Whitney. "What would you think if I —"

The denunciation of Whitney was becoming too round, too fierce and too forcible. Marion had meant that Oliver should go to some lengths to assist her in her ruse, but she had not meant by any means to let him in for all this — had not quite sufficiently applied her imagination to perceive perspectively that under the circumstances her husband's rage must turn most bitterly toward the man whom he would regard as a perfidious friend in his home.

"Have you no manhood — what would you think if I —" replied Stanton. He paused this second time not for lack of words, but because Marion had suddenly darted backwards, clapping both hands to her ears.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Did I hear what?" bawled Stanton angrily.

"I thought," she answered, dropping her hands, "that I heard some one throw a brick through a glass house!"

CHAPTER XXVII

ANOTHER BRICK

STANTON paused in his denunciation, halted by Marion's just and farcical twist of his indignation — her sudden slipping of the shoe to his own foot. It was improbable, however, that with his ingrained standards of what should govern a woman's conduct and what should govern that of his own sex, that he would have been in the least content to let the matter rest there.

But General Livingston and his son Bob came upon them at this time and in the face of these new arrivals Stanton was reduced to surly silence.

General Livingston was descanting very enthusiastically to his son.

"A remarkably attractive young woman, Robert," he said with his fine old air of finality. "Remarkably attractive."

Bob nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said. But he squirmed as he said it

All his own uneasiness flooded back upon him.

Marion looked at her father smilingly.

"All of the other women will think I am monopolizing you men," she said. "I believe I will join them."

She looked back at them all, content now to leave them together, for Ned Morris had followed the General and Bob and she felt sure that Whitney could be trusted to maneuver General Livingston, her father, out of the way. That done, undoubtedly Bob would go to Howard with the story that was uppermost to his mind — the Palm Beach affair — and Morris could be expected also to go to Howard with his tale of the handsome widow and then — then the time would come for her to know fully the extent of the infatuation in which Mrs. Blakemore held her husband; whether it was strong enough to be proof against the wound to his vanity that the stories of Bob and Ned would inflict. Would the wound prove incurable in Howard; unpardonable of the widow? This done, down deep, did Howard love her, his wife? And the end must come rightly if he did.

"I hope to see you all in a few minutes," she said with meaning as she left the room.

"Certainly," said Stanton perfunctorily, glowering to observe that Whitney still walked at the side of his wife. Marion chatted closely and rapidly to him as they walked toward the door. Stanton drew an easier breath to observe that Whitney paused in the doorway, bowed and turned back into the room.

"Robert and I were just discussing Mrs. Blakemore, Howard," said the old General. "We agreed that she was a very handsome woman. How did Marion run across her?"

Stanton stared. His answer came raggedly and stupidly.

"Er — ah — don't exactly know," he managed to say.

"Don't know?" asked the surprised General.

"Quite accidentally, wasn't it, Howard?" asked Whitney, interestedly.

Stanton grasped at that straw.

"Yes," he hastened to say, with no appreciation of the humor of it, "quite accidentally — that's it — quite accidentally."

"Ah," said the General, unmindful of Stanton's embarrassment that was so evident to Morris, Bob and Whitney; "I see — just one of those queer coincidences. The way charming

women frequently come together," he added gracefully.

"Exactly," said Whitney. He slipped an arm into that of General Livingston and the old General, being very fond of Whitney, indeed, accepted the cordial attitude most graciously. As an outcome of the chat Marion had with him as they moved toward the door, Whitney now said:

"By the way, General, this is just my chance. I've often wanted to get the story out of you — from your own lips — of the bullet hole in this interesting bit of statuary."

With his free hand he indicated the old-fashioned clock. General Livingston's eyes lighted. It was his pet stock story. He did not recall, as Whitney was quite sure he would not, that his present interlocutor had heard him tell the yarn some half dozen or more times before.

"It was over a woman, of course," began the General. "It was back in 1770 — two loves made a serious business."

His voice sunk lower as he went on with the anecdote and as it droned into the confidential, Bob Livingston saw his opportunity to detach himself from the two — it was conceded that it

was no rudeness toward his father for him to withdraw when this story was in progress — and made straight for Howard Stanton.

"Well," said young Livingston, looking his brother-in-law over from head to feet; "you certainly played hell with this party."

"What do you mean?"

Stanton plainly did not know what to expect from this source and he received no enlightenment when Livingston, waving his hands, scornfully rejoined:

"What do I mean? Oh, I mean the weather — the airships — the Japanese war. You know what I mean, well enough. I think you played it low down."

The young man's manner was most emphatic; his indignation very high, and his cheeks flushed.

Stanton's indignation rose to meet it.

"Look here, Bob; don't go too far. You refer, I presume, to one of our guests."

Young Mr. Livingston made a very low, a very elaborate bow.

"I do," he replied. Then straightening up, he demanded: "Why was she invited to-night? Of all times, why to-night?"

"Why not to-night?" asked the puzzled Stanton.

Livingston drew back and stared at him. It was a most insulting glance. It implied that Stanton was too stupid for tolerance.

"Well, for heaven's sake," he asked: "don't you think it is very embarrassing for me when you consider everything?"

"I don't see —"

"Don't see — don't see?" mocked Livingston. "Why — me! — Mrs. Blakemore!"

He bent over, staring Stanton squarely in the eye.

"Suppose Salie," he asked bitterly, "should get next?"

Young Mr. Livingston made a gesture of despair.

"Whew! If she should — if she should!" he said.

"You — Mrs. Blakemore?" questioned the dazed Stanton.

"Sure! Didn't you know? I thought you must know. Why," Bob Livingston concluded, "I told Marion."

"You told Marion?" Horror was added to the dazedness on Stanton's face.

"Yes — then — at the time — when I was tied up with Puss."

Stanton gasped.

"Puss!"

Young Livingston smiled now for the first time during his conversation with his brother-in-law.

"Puss — yes," he nodded. "That's the name I used to call her — the pet name, you know, that I used to call her."

Stanton gulped. He looked queerly at the somewhat younger man.

"The name you used to call her," he remarked unsteadily.

"Yes, yes," nodded Livingston. "It was last year at Palm Beach. We'd been awful good friends for a long time. She did like me pretty well, so, of course, I felt like a dog when I had to do it. But you know, I met Salie and fell in love with her."

Young Livingston rammed his hands into his trousers pockets, looked at the hearth rug and then looked up again.

"Of course, when that happened," he said; "when I fell in love with Salie, I couldn't stand for the other one, you know. So I went to

Marion." He smiled again, fondly and affectionately this time. "Marion is a good fellow; you can't pull the wool over Marion's eyes. I made a clean breast and it was Marion who figured out what to do and got me out."

Stanton was as near nervous collapse as a man can be and still stand on his feet.

"Marion knew!" he exclaimed.

Bob nodded.

"Got you out?"

"That's what she did — dear old girl."

While Stanton stood there speechless and regarded with dull amazement his young brother-in-law, the droning voice of the old General rose in his talk to Oliver Whitney.

"So the seconds placed them on either side of the dining room and they fired across the table. The Englishman's bullet struck the piece of statuary and he crumpled up dead across the room beside the fireplace where all his love-making had been conducted. That was the way," concluded the General proudly, "my great-grandfather avenged a wrong done a female member of his family? It was proper in those good old days."

"But duelling is out of fashion nowadays,

General." Whitney could not let this chance go by. He shot a swift look of mischief at Stanton, who, vaguely hearing the talk, turned and listened.

"A great many of the good old customs have gone out of fashion in this damned era of selfishness," said General Livingston.

He dropped his contemptuous manner, however, and said to Whitney:

"But I am forgetting — you will go to the opera with us, will you not?"

He waved his hand.

"No extra trouble, my dear Oliver; not in the least. I'll telephone right up and have an extra chair for you put in the box. Howard, where is the telephone on this floor?"

"Through this door, General. Can I do anything?"

"No; thank you."

Whitney had mentioned the opera and hinted for an invitation with the expectation that the General would think of this when his story had finished — Whitney had even gone so far as to interrupt the story to make sure of an added reason that would keep the General out of the room until both Bob Livingston and Ned Morris

had their opportunities of telling Howard Stanton about "Puss" when she had been their "Puss." He had been able also to determine on entering the room that Bob had been telling Stanton all that Marion so greatly desired him to tell her husband. And now he beckoned young Livingston and looked toward Morris. Morris had been sitting in an easy chair smoking nervously at his cigar and again as nervously sipping at a highball. He had several times looked over to where Stanton and Livingston stood talking — looked anxiously as if awaiting an opportunity to speak to one or the other of the men. Of course, it was Stanton with whom he wished to talk.

Now that he saw his opportunity to confer with Stanton, Mr. Morris took a final sip of his highball, nipped his cigar decisively between his teeth, arose and walked firmly over toward Stanton, who stood leaning against the fireplace trying his best to assimilate the shock that young Bob Livingston had given him a few minutes before. And that it was proving indigestible intelligence, one could have seen by the wry expression that his face wore.

CHAPTER XXVIII

STILL ANOTHER BRICK

IT was not the easiest thing in the world for Mr. Ned Morris to broach the subject which he wished to discuss with his brother-in-law. So, for a time, he simply stood near Howard, contemplatively puffing at his cigar and studying the tiling of the fireplace. Twice he coughed. But finally, with an almost heroic effort to break through his embarrassment, he added:

"Well, Howard, it's one on me; I'll have to confess confidentially, of course, because I need your help."

Stanton's reception of his advance was not encouraging.

"What is it?" asked that young man, with no effort to hide a suspicious attitude.

Again Mr. Morris indulged in a slight cough. He smiled. But it was a wooden smile.

"I did not think," he said hesitatingly, "that I'd ever be caught with the goods."

Stanton did not help him out. He simply went on regarding him in a suspicious manner.

"And after all my lectures to you, too," admitted Morris, with self-reproach.

"Caught with the goods?" Stanton snapped at him questioningly. "What do you mean?"

He stood with his hands behind his back and inquired indignantly:

"Why can't you speak out? You lawyers get so in the habit of beating about the bush. Caught with the goods? What goods?"

Mr. Ned Morris's smile may have been meant to be pleasant and charming. It impressed Stanton only as being assinine as the lawyer answered:

"Why — er — to be sure — very charming goods, indeed."

"What?"

"I say very charming goods. You'll admit that?"

"What goods?"

"Er — Mrs. Blakemore," said Morris softly.

"My God!" cried Stanton.

Mr. Morris studied the end of his cigar thoughtfully.

"It is bad, I'll admit," he went on very mildly for him; indeed, in a manner so surprisingly diffident that Stanton, at his wits' end, was more suspicious than ever.

"But you can understand, Howard — after your experience with the mysterious lady in the automobile, can't you, eh?"

Morris had sidled up to him; Morris was using his best manner to win over to himself the alliance of his brother-in-law in the predicament in which he found himself — the avowed friendship of longstanding that Mrs. Blakemore had made in front of his wife Belle, a friendship of which she had hitherto known nothing; a friendship which he would now have to explain.

"You can understand — can't you?" asked Morris.

Stanton did not look at him directly. Instead, a very queer light was shining in his eyes.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I am beginning to understand — I think I am beginning to understand."

Morris was too engrossed in his own sad case to notice the peculiarly bitter manner in which

Stanton made this statement. Morris, thinking only of himself, gave a sigh of huge relief and said:

"That's the best of having a damned rake for a brother-in-law. When you get into trouble you can come to him."

His bit of jocularity was fully intended to bring a smile to the lips of Stanton. It had an entirely opposite effect. Stanton, with a wounded look in his eyes, the look of self-pity that comes in the hurting of a man's self-love, grew suddenly angry and his voice became vibrant with the tone of his emotion as he answered:

"Yes; a damned rake for a brother-in-law! That's what I have!"

Mr. Ned Morris, perfection of all that was conventional and respectable in the world, was alarmed and horrified to hear himself so classified. He gestured in agony for Stanton to speak more quietly.

"Sh, Howard," he pleaded. "Please — Howard. Please."

Stanton walked several paces away from him before he paid any attention to the request. And when he turned he went on speaking as

loudly as before while Morris wiggled in fear and disquiet.

"Why should I shield you?" Stanton demanded. "Yes; a damned rake! How dare you — you, the husband of my innocent sister!"

Even the lips of Mr. Morris, to say nothing of his face, grew very pale.

"My God, Howard," he remonstrated, "you won't tell Belle! Why, she'd leave me in a minute."

"And why shouldn't she?"

His portly brother-in-law had no ready answer, trained lawyer that he was. He could only extend his plump hands and go on piteously pleading.

"But it's all past. Lose her for what's past?"

"Lose her fortune, you mean," sneered Stanton bitingly back at him.

"Stanton!"

Morris, for all his smoothness, his plausibility, his anxiety for the world's goods and the world's softest spots for his resting, was nevertheless not all a fish. His cry was one of genuine anger and indignation.

And young Bob Livingston, who, by force of

the loud tones Stanton had been using, was an involuntary eavesdropper, was also moved to exclaim in remonstrance:

"Howard!"

For his own sake it were better perhaps that he had not been so impulsive in his cry, for Stanton wheeled on him then, glaring as fiercely as ever, and called:

"You too, Livingston — you are no better! How dare you protest to me?"

Stanton indicated Livingston to Morris.

"He just finished," he sneered, "telling me the same."

Livingston and Morris were thus left facing each other.

They both asked each other the same thing.

"You, too?" Bob asked of Ned.

"You, too?" Ned asked of Bob.

And each nodded an affirmative to the other's question.

Livingston did not take kindly to the thing at all.

"I introduced you," he said to Morris indignantly, "and you took my place."

"Somebody had to take your place," retorted Morris no less angrily.

"Well, I'll be darned," said young Mr. Livingston, and stared around at everybody.

"You both ought to be," rejoined Stanton with bitterness and contempt. "There you stand — married ten years — married one month! — the same; both alike."

He swept his hand at them.

"Two pretty modern gentlemen," he went on. "A nice state of affairs! A pretty state of affairs. A pleasant situation."

Oliver Whitney, observing the virtuous indignation of Stanton at finding that his two brothers-in-law had indulged themselves quite as he had indulged himself — and there was no lessening of his indignation at the thought that they had not been caught and he had — was moved impulsively into a low whistle of surprise and amusement.

It brought Stanton angrily around at him.

"What's the matter with you, Whitney?" he cried challengingly, as if that gentleman might fully expect to lose his life the next instant if he should confess that there was the least thing the matter with him.

Whitney smiled and cupping a hand behind his ear, he replied:

"Oh, nothing. I thought I heard another brick go through that glass house."

Stanton stopped, reddening more highly even than his anger had tinged his countenance.

"You are right, though, Stanton," Whitney continued; "it is a pretty situation. Now," he stopped to give his words a certain incisiveness, "if we only had the name of the lady in your automobile accident, it might be perfect."

The words so deliberately and crisply spoken had their quick effect. Stanton came down to earth with a bump.

"Huh?"

That was all he could say, as with dropped jaw he stood and stared at Whitney.

CHAPTER XXIX

"THAT REPORTER IS BACK"

THE room was not clearly before the vision of young Howard Stanton, as stung by Whitney's words into a full realization of all that his wife wanted driven into his mind, he gazed at the men, his lips parted, his eyes giving complete expression to the confused state of his mind.

He had nothing to say. Indeed, what was there to be said excepting that he had been a fool — excepting that in this very moment, for the sake of a woman inconstant, fickle, merely selfishly vain in her conquest of him as she must have been in her conquest of these other two who stood before him, he had jeopardized the love of a woman infinitely finer, sweeter and more beautiful; had jeopardized — he stopped and drew a hand across a face shot with pain. Jeopardized — indeed, he had lost her love! Neglect had killed it. She — his wife — at that very in-

stant loved another. Why, the man who had won her away from him stood there in his sight — Whitney, Oliver Whitney, smooth, quite as handsome as himself and as Stanton very well realized, infinitely more clever. Whitney had the sort of love his wife would demand. The man had stood in the background for eight years looking at her with the same changeless love in his eyes. Marion could not be blamed if she had turned from him to Whitney; if she had tired of his neglect and set her face toward where she knew a steady light of love was always to be found burning.

The fury that he had felt against her when he saw her standing with her face lifted upward to that of Oliver Whitney, when he saw turned toward Whitney the same fond glance that formerly had only been turned toward him, was now dead in him; the fires of his anger smouldered only weakly. For an instant he thought of stealing over to Whitney and seizing him by the throat and engaging him fiercely; but he quickly dismissed that as being a ridiculous thing to do. Who could blame Whitney for seeking to reap the reward of his faithfulness? He was sure that Whitney had been a true friend

before; that Marion would have entertained no declarations up to that time when the twist of a tire sent his automobile into the ditch and revealed a part of his life which had been hitherto kept in closest secrecy from his wife. How could he reasonably reproach Marion with looking for a new love after he had been discovered indulging himself similarly as it were?

And there stood Morris and Livingston, culpables like himself — fools like himself they had been — there they stood — three monkeys on the widow's string! That was the unflattering characterization in which Stanton now saw himself and the other two men.

They stood in a silent group as old General Livingston returned from having used the telephone.

"I have managed to have two chairs placed in the box, Whitney," said the old gentleman. He coughed and threw out his chest, hesitated a little further and said casually — too casually perhaps: "Suppose we ask Mrs. Blakemore up with us." And then the General did not seek to check his enthusiasm.

"I tell you," he said, "she's a charming woman — makes me feel young again.'

He braced his shoulders and smiled.

"Next!" called Howard Stanton with a bitter grimace at the other three men.

"What's that, Howard?" demanded the old man sharply. "Don't you think she's charming?"

Stanton hunched his shoulders and clenched his hands. The effort at self-control that he made was a big one. "Yes — yes," he answered, "I think she's charming." His voice grew intensely meaningful. "Everybody seems to think she's charming!"

"Of course," said the surprised cavalier of the bygone epoch. "Why, if I were young — if —"

Stanton felt a snap of his nerves. His self-control deserted him utterly. He laughed, and in the excitement of his feeling it came forth in coarse and jarring laughter.

"Oh, there's no age limit," he said fiercely. "I suppose soon — soon you'll be like the rest — calling her Puss — Puss —Puss, and begging me to help you out."

The smiles of the other three men were ill-suppressed. The old General flushed and war signals flashed in his eyes.

"Sir! How dare you?" he demanded. "What do you mean?"

"Mean!"

Stanton flung his arms wildly.

"I mean — O, nothing!"

He followed this extraordinary speech — extraordinary, that is, to the ears of General Livingston, with a sweeping gesture at Morris, Bob Livingston and Oliver Whitney.

"Mean?" he repeated. "Ask them!"

And with that, Stanton, too utterly unstrung to further contain himself, flung himself out of the doorway, vouchsafing no further explanation or remarks.

Gasping with anger and amazement, his father-in-law gazed towards the door and then looked back at the other men.

"What's the matter with that fellow?" he asked.

There was a silence.

"Does anyone of you know what is the matter with him? He said to ask you. What is it?"

Mr. Ned Morris wet his lips. Then he twiddled his mustache.

General Livingston stared at him, impatient for some disclosure or other.

"Probably — probably — he — er — has worries of some sort."

General Livingston shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"He's — ah — often — er — ah — abrupt, you know."

Manifestly this was no explanation at all, so the old man turned an inquiring glance on his son.

"I'm sure, father," said Bob, "I haven't the slightest idea what is the matter with Howard."

The General considered with wrinkled brow.

"But Puss," he said. "What of Puss . . .?"

Whitney, who had waited for the others to speak, now decided that the moment was at hand when a rescue committee was needed. He appointed himself one.

"Why, that's a pet name, sir," he said to the puzzled old gentleman. "Puss is a pet name in — in, I may say, general use. Stanton is worried. I am sure he hardly realized what he was saying. He's had a great deal to upset him recently — that automobile accident, you know. I'm afraid we teased him a little and that, with this reporter's calling to-night, it put him off.

I'm sure," he concluded pleasantly, "he'll be back in time to apologize, General."

The grizzled military man smoothed his gray mustache and nodded in a satisfied manner at Whitney.

"Ah, to be sure," he said. "He's had his lesson. He's had his lesson, hasn't he?"

"He has," agreed Whitney with emphasis.

General Livingston looked toward Bob Livingston and Ned Morris. His glance at them at this juncture caused them both to smile sheepishly.

The General shook his finger at them.

"Now, you boys stop plaguing him," he said jocularly.

"Yes, sir," they both answered with an excess of deference.

The butler, soft-footed, appeared.

"What is it, Wilson?" asked General Livingston.

"A note, sir."

"For whom?"

"For Mr. Stanton."

Wilson stepped back a few paces. He cleared his throat uneasily.

"That reporter is back," he said ominously.

CHAPTER XXX

COMPLETE REVELATION

AT the mention by Wilson of the presence of a reporter, General Livingston frowned. In his conservative estimate of things, Howard Stanton was at this moment deserving of sympathy.

"A note?" he asked Wilson.

"Yes, sir."

He looked about at the others more or less for confirmation of the action he meant to take.

"It's a shame," he said, "to bother the boy when he's so excited already. It's some trivial matter, doubtless. I suppose it would be all right for me to —"

"I should think so," affirmed Morris.

"He'll thank you, dad, for taking it off his hands," assented Bob.

"Well, then, I'll do it."

General Livingston took the note from Wil-

son, opened it and read it. Storm clouds swept over his countenance.

For some minutes he seemed to wish to speak, but to be unable to do so. Finally, however, he very forcibly cleared his throat, and as he read, his voice trembled with indignation.

"'Mr. Stanton,'" he read from the note in his hand, "'we have identified positively the lady who was with you at the time of your automobile accident.

"'All the papers are clamoring for the story.

"'We are going to release the story unless you prove our identification wrong. I would advise your seeing me.

"'HARRY LYNCH,
"'*City News.*'"

Young Bob Livingston blinked his eyes and whistled.

"Whew!" he said. "That Lynch has a nerve!"

The letter fluttered in the shaking hand of the enraged General.

"I'll see to this," he declared. "That poor boy shall not be worried by this damnable hounding any longer!" He started in a stride toward the door, but Whitney's voice halted him.

"I hesitate about suggesting, General," said Whitney coolly, "but don't you think it might be well to have Morris see him instead?"

The old man flung up his head, challenging Whitney's reason.

"You see, General, Morris is a lawyer, and he could make the necessary threat of libel suit."

"Lawyer, the devil!" snapped back the old man. "This is no time for a lawyer." Morris's ears were startled at the General's concluding statement. "This is the time for a man," he cried.

He wheeled toward Wilson.

"Show that reporter in," he said in a voice in which rage was thrilling perceptibly.

"Yes, sir."

"Careful, dad," said Bob Livingston.

"Why should I be careful, sir?" asked his irate father.

"Because, dad, this chap Lynch is a 'star' man. He's very clever."

"Be careful? Huh! You see I am calm — quite calm; you can see that."

By way of confirmation General Livingston drew himself up and revealed his body trembling with excitement.

"I wouldn't like to be Lynch," observed Bob to Whitney, and they both laughed.

Young Mr. Lynch entered the room with his usual brisk manner and his usual alert eye.

When he saw Bob Livingston he nodded.

"Hello, Livingston," he said.

"Hello, Lynch," said Bob uneasily.

"Well, sir?" demanded General Livingston.

Young Mr. Lynch looked at him with some surprise.

"Yes?" he answered pleasantly.

"I am General Livingston."

Mr. Lynch of the *City News* bowed appreciatively and made his usual reply. It was getting to sound stereotyped in spite of his effort always to make it sound spontaneous.

"Oh, yes, General," he said. "I recognize you. We know most of the big men."

The compliment did not entirely glance off, but the General's voice was still very stern as he demanded:

"What do you mean, sir, by this note?"

He was almost on the point of shaking it in the reporter's face when Lynch spoke in his quick, decisive manner.

"My note?" he asked. "Isn't it quite plain?

I think, however, General Livingston, that I addressed it to Mr. Stanton!"

The jab sent the old General storming.

"Plain," he cried. "It's too damnably plain: it's despicable, contemptible blackmail — that's what it is!"

Young Mr. Lynch looked very steadily at the General for a second and then toward the old man's son.

"Livingston," he said, "you ought to know better than to let your father make a mistake like that."

And Whitney moved forward quickly, stepping in front of Stanton's father-in-law, and protested.

"General!" he cautioned.

"Dad!" added Bob in the same tone.

"Hold your tongue, sir," cried the old man at his son. He looked again at the reporter.

"I represent Mr. Stanton," he said hotly, "and I tell you, sir, that I do not propose to have him hounded in this damnable fashion any longer. I shall hold you personally responsible."

"General," said Mr. Lynch smilingly,

" you're the fifth man that has said that to me since three o'clock."

" What? "

Mr. Lynch was still imperturbable.

" And if you do physically assault me," he said in a manner showing him to be quite at his professional ease in the face of this outburst, " I shall certainly have to land you in the night court, General — and collect space on the story. It would make a great spread on the first page, sure — ' Famous Old Soldier Fined for Brutally Assaulting Innocent Young Newspaperman.' "

Lynch, not altogether unintentionally, had succeeded almost in goading the white-haired man into uttering a wild yell of rage.

Then his feeling overcame him in another direction. He was almost tearful with combined rage and a sense of humiliation. He asked:

" Haven't you newspapermen any sense of personal decency — personal dignity? "

" Don't be too hard on us, General Livingston," returned Lynch. " During business hours our associations are very bad."

" What do you mean? "

Young Mr. Lynch did not reply directly. He had evidently made up his mind that it was fully time to get down to the matter in hand. So he walked a few paces nearer to the General and said incisively:

"We have the name of the lady who was with Howard Stanton in his car at the time of his accident. We have learned all about the trip, and we have the woman's name. So I have come to give Mr. Stanton a —"

"Would the papers print that?" asked the General, starting to pace up and down the room.

Lynch laughed.

"Would they? Would they print it? Well —"

"Then," said the General with stern dignity, "I shall say nothing. But our lawyers will take some action."

Mr. Lynch shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, then," he said, "they had better take it quick."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll have fifty reporters up here by to-morrow night."

"Well, and if Mr. Stanton refuses to say anything?"

"If Mr. Stanton refuses to say anything we will simply send out the story that the woman in the car with him at the time of his automobile accident was —"

Mr. Lynch had the dramatic instinct to the full. He paused. Then he supplemented clearly and shortly:

"Was Mrs. Elizabeth Blakemore."

CHAPTER XXXI

MARION TAKES THE REINS AGAIN

MARION'S father was startled. And his rage knew no diminution save that it turned now from Mr. Lynch to the thought of Howard Stanton. It was a more serious brand of rage — bitter, cold and fierce. That Stanton should have had the effrontery to introduce this woman of his misadventure into his home, should have dared to introduce her to his, General Livingston's daughter; should have so far forgotten the honor due his wife to do this thing, was an act of brazenry too great for the comprehension of the old school gentleman. He stood facing Lynch with a wild look in his eyes. And he almost tottered.

But he was not the only one in the room who was startled. Morris and Bob Livingston were staring at Lynch with mouths agape.

Now for the first time they understood the reason for Stanton's outbreak against them a

little while before. It had been quite astonishing that the big, good-natured, easy going fellow, himself admittedly a culprit in many things, should have taken the high moral tone with them that he had. But now that Lynch's revelation had shown them that their "Puss" — she had been their "Puss"— was now his "Puss," the mysterious woman of the automobile accident; they much better understood his attitude; they could understand the rip to his vanity in the discovery.

And Stanton himself now entered the room. He had quite recovered his calm. In the course of doing so, he came to the conclusion that his conduct toward General Livingston had not only been strange but almost offensive and it was with a full resolution to make amends that he returned.

He lost no time in going up to the old man and holding out his hand.

"General," he said, "I wish to apologize."

He fell back before the whirling return that he got from Marion's father. The old general looked upon him so fiercely, with a face so livid with rage, that Stanton was betrayed into an exclamation of amazement.

"Apologize!" roared the general. "Apologize! How dare you, sir?"

He swept a gaunt arm out toward the younger man. "My great grandfather," he said, "killed his man for just such an insult —"

"I did not mean to insult you, General."

Oliver Whitney perhaps caught the swift gleam that had come into the eyes of Mr. Lynch of the *City News* — that same quick look of interest that perhaps, comes into the eyes of a scientist who finds himself on the true trace of a discovery.

Whitney stepped quickly forward toward the old soldier.

"All this can be of no interest to Mr. Lynch," he said significantly. "Mr. Lynch wants a direct statement."

He looked toward the reporter.

"I'm sure, Mr. Lynch," he said stepping back; "if you will come with me just a moment, Mr. Stanton will give you a statement."

Mr. Lynch was unquestionably a reluctant companion but Whitney's manner was so friendly and persuasive as he slipped his arm into that of the young newspaperman and led him toward the door that Lynch was taken away

perforce in preference to committing an outright rudeness.

At the door, Whitney looked back.

"When you wish to see Mr. Lynch, Stanton," he said, "he'll be here with me."

Mr. Lynch made something of a wry grimace as he observed Mr. Oliver Whitney carefully close the double doors of the room after they had left it.

General Livingston his eyes glaring, his nostrils dilated, strode toward Stanton.

"Now, sir, we have only members of the family present," he said fiercely. "I will settle with you."

"Settle with me?" demanded Stanton.

"Yes; decidedly," said the general with his rage no bit abated. "Although you did steal my daughter, I had forgiven. I had come to think you a gentleman." The old man put infinite scorn into the last word of the sentence.

"Even, for her sake, I forgave this recent scandal." General Livingston drew back. "But such shameful — such dastardly conduct passes all consideration — bringing that woman into this house." He thrust forward his face until it was very close to Stanton's. "Horse-

whipping is too good for you, sir. Horsewhipping is too good!"

Stanton made a gesture of resentment. He was on the point of demanding an explanation. But the old man went on tumultuously. "Palming off this woman on my daughter — your wife? Your innocent wife! Oh," cried the General, "if I were only younger!"

He shot a quick glance at the old clock that had a bullet hole in it.

"They knew better how to settle a case of this kind in the old days," he concluded.

"Why — why, father, I can settle it," said young Livingston.

He only succeeded in drawing the old man's fury to himself.

"You!"

He turned from his son contemptuously.

"My poor child — she must not know!" he said with sincere determination and affection.

His child herself appeared at the door entering from the conservatory. She was smiling and she was wondering. She was wondering if it had all turned out as she had planned; wondered if Stanton had come to know all about Mrs. Blakemore; had come to see himself as one

of a long line of mere pets, all dancing their prettiest or showing off their cleverest traits for the amusement of the fascinating widow.

"Haven't you ungallant men finished your cigars yet?" she asked.

Immediately she perceived the strained attitudes of them all. Something had happened? What? She entered the room quickly and, with a backward glance toward where she had left the other women instantly closed the door.

"What's the matter?"

No one spoke.

"Tell me — what is it?"

Her father glanced at her pityingly and lovingly. The sight of her did not serve to calm him. If anything his rage grew greater, his blood rose more violently. But he drew himself together.

"Marion," he said with dignity; "Mrs. Blakemore must leave this house at once."

"Father," she said, shaking her head; "I do not understand."

"Don't ask questions, Marion," he said with his old fashioned assumption of parental despotism, "Just accept your father's word. She must leave."

General Livingston took Howard Stanton in with a cold stare.

"And then," he added, to his daughter, "I will take you home."

Marion again shook her head.

"But Mrs. Blakemore is our guest, father. You are our guest also. You must explain."

Stanton gulped hard. He saw his wife — saw her as one quite lost to him, but he could not endure the suspense of the present moment; could not endure the suffering that he feared might be brought upon her before them all. So he spoke in a quick, explanatory manner.

"That reporter got in, Marion," he said.

She paused. The intelligence of the message and her complete grasp of its meaning was expressed in her gray eyes.

"Oh," she said merely.

"You cannot," boomed the voice of her father; "stay with decency under the same roof with the woman this scoundrel has palmed off on you."

Marion looked calmly at her father, conscious, however, of the storm she was bound to raise by her forthcoming reply.

"I invited Mrs. Blakemore, father," she said.

"Marion!"

"I know everything," she went on. And then to make his understanding of the matter as complete as need be, she supplemented. "I knew when I invited her."

Her father drew away from her, staring closely.

"Marion," he said, "you are insane!"

She laughingly shook her head at him again.

"No; only sensible," she replied.

She looked at her husband.

"Is that reporter still here," she asked.

"In the hall," Stanton answered.

"Ask him to come in."

A general murmur of surprise went up from all the men. The old General fairly spluttered. Stanton himself had gasped and now he plainly hesitated to obey her request.

"Fetch him," she said.

"He shall not come in," cried General Livingston.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CHECKMATING OF MR. LYNCH

WITH all the vim and vigor of his old battlefield days, General Livingston had declared to his daughter that Lynch, the reporter, should not be admitted. But Marion, as before, gave clear indication that she was doing her own thinking and acting in her own home.

She looked at her irate father calmly, even in a gentle and conciliatory manner. But nevertheless, she said:

"Father, I told you once that what concerns my own life I must settle in my own way."

"Marion."

"Yes, sir; that is what I said. And I don't want to appear disrespectful, but really, father, you cannot coerce me in my own house."

The old General drew back, altogether nonplussed. He had known Marion intimately since her babyhood. He had always chuck-

lingly admired her own strength of will. He knew enough of it not to try and gainsay her at this moment. He stepped aside, therefore, as she resolutely walked toward the double doors out of which Oliver Whitney had more or less forced the reluctant reporter.

"Good evening, Mr. Lynch," called Marion. And then: "Won't you come in? You too, Oliver."

Whitney and the reporter came into the room. Young Mr. Lynch was evidently surprised at the new turn of affairs. He had expected the usual thing — a family consultation and then a formal and perfunctory statement given out; one that would seek to becloud rather than vouchsafe any real information in the now celebrated case. Lynch did not know quite what to make of it, and his experience in dealing many times with persons who had something to conceal, who had designs of pulling the wool over his eyes brought him in with an attitude of wariness, not to say suspicion.

Marion's next move was entirely to puzzle him. She stepped forward and with her most gracious manner greeted him.

"Good evening, Mr. Lynch," said she.

"How are you? This is an unexpected pleasure."

Lynch took the small hand extended to him. There was nothing slighting either in the handshake he gave it. He was a young man and quite human and Marion instantly exercised over him the charm that her prettiness and complete femininity and frank gray eyes quite generally exercised over those of his sex.

Young Mr. Lynch was even moved to some emotion by the grace of her reception of him; the matter-of-fact kindliness of it, quite as if she did not regard him as an intruder.

"I hope you will believe me, Mrs. Stanton," he said in sincere tones, "when I tell you it is not a pleasure to me to have to come on this errand."

"Thank you, Mr. Lynch," she smiled at him.

The young man squared his shoulders.

"As a matter of fact," said he, "I'd rather talk to Mr. Stanton."

Quite resolutely the young woman shook her head.

"Sorry," she said, "but —"

There was no need for her to say more. It was plain to Mr. Lynch that she was quite firmly

decided to talk to him herself. It was also quite plain to Marion that young Mr. Lynch liked her and felt friendly toward her. And that was no end of encouragement at the moment.

Indeed, she was hardly clear as to what she intended to do or to say when she invited Mr. Lynch into the room. All she knew was that she did not want anything to miscarry now in her own private exposure of Mrs. Blakemore to her husband. She feared that if the public prints took the matter up with a great clamor, there might be due reasons that would actuate Stanton; reasons of a false gallantry, perhaps, that would make him deem it necessary to go to the widow's defense, even to the extent of divorcing her, Marion, and espousing the other woman. Her heart was beating rapidly, therefore, with the fear that this public exposure of the identity of her husband's companion on the night of the accident was about to happen.

"Please understand my position, Mrs. Stanton," said Mr. Lynch, "and how I regret personally the questions that as a newspaperman I must put."

Mrs. Stanton bowed.

"Bluntly then, Mrs. Stanton," continued Mr. Lynch. "We have the name of that woman."

Marion's heart swelled. She felt the need of gasping for breath. But outwardly she showed no sign of her emotion.

"Yes?" she questioned, smoothly, affably.

"And," said Mr. Lynch as bluntly, now that he was started, "we are going to publish it."

"The woman's name?"

"Yes."

Marion was silent.

"Unless," added Mr. Lynch, "it can be proven wrong."

Marion hesitated. She turned her gray eyes slowly up and looked at Mr. Lynch.

"I expected that," she said quietly.

Mr. Lynch bit his lip.

"Who is she?" asked Marion with outward calm.

Mr. Lynch paused. He had got to a part of his work that he did not at all like. Now that it had come to the actual point of confronting Mrs. Stanton with proof of her husband's duplicity he was wishing that he were somewhere else — anywhere else, so that he were well out

of the task. But the task was there and it had to be done. Inexorably, it was his task to perform.

He spoke regretfully.

"The woman," he said, "is Mrs. Elizabeth Blakemore."

To Mr. Lynch the result of his statement was most astounding. Instead of awakening a glare of resentment, anger or any other emotion, akin in the countenance of Mrs. Stanton, he beheld that young woman throw her head back suddenly, dash the ringlets from her brow and give vent to a loud outburst of merriment. Peal after peal of laughter followed it.

Not only Mr. Lynch was amazed. All the men standing about Mrs. Stanton looked upon her with equal astonishment. They could not understand this new kink in her woman's way that found her able to laugh so heartily and enjoyably at the very moment when the sensation she had tried so long to conceal from the newspapers was about to break with the full force of its head-line qualities into the public prints. Oliver Whitney who knew so well her plan to stifle all the divorce talk; who knew how unreasonable it seemed to him, but nevertheless, how

deeply the little woman loved Howard Stanton and how she meant to give him his chance quietly to abandon the widow and return wholly and solely to her; was perhaps the most surprised man of them all. Stanton could only look at her blankly. The old General regarded her wonderingly and Bob Livingston and Ned Morris first looked at each other and then at her quite as if she had entered the room eating fire or doing some other equally astounding thing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CALLING OF MRS. BLAKEMORE

WHEN Marion had done with her laughter, she looked again at the amazed Mr. Lynch.

She made a movement as if to go to the door. But she turned back.

"I — I don't understand your amusement, Mrs. Stanton," said young Mr. Lynch and, in truth, he did not. Nor did any other person in the room although politely they assumed looks of amusement themselves. Somehow they felt it was part of the roles that Marion wished them to play just then.

"Oh, this is too good — too good," she laughed anew. "Forgive me, Mr. Lynch."

Mr. Lynch thought he detected something of the hysterical in her laughter now. But there was nothing unnatural about the manner in which she turned toward the other men in the room. They continued looking amused but

their expressions were not sufficiently expansive to suit the little woman. So she said to them with a gesture taking them all in:

"Howard — did — all of you — did you hear that? Did you hear the name? What a splendid joke."

"Splendid — haw! haw!" uttered the General as genuinely as possible.

"Fine — ha! ha!" echoed young Bob Livingston.

"Ho — ho," choroused Mr. Ned Morris, "I never really, you know, heard anything like it!"

Whitney was not quite so uproarious. But he obligingly joined in the laughter nevertheless.

"I told Mr. Lynch," he said quietly, "that he was on a cold trail."

But the while young Mr. Lynch had not been using his trained eyes and ears of observation for nothing. He was psychically sure of the falsity of Mrs. Stanton's merriment. And palpably that of the men rang far off the true.

"As for Mr. Lynch," said that young gentleman himself with a touch of chagrin in his voice, "you can't laugh him off."

"Laugh you off?" asked Marion.

"Yes, Mrs. Stanton. Merely laughing at my statement of the identity of the woman who was in Mr. Stanton's car does not disprove the fact that I have stated."

"Oh — Oh,— of course, not — Mr. Lynch," she answered, "but you must forgive my having my laugh first."

She faced him seriously then albeit a smile still hovered about her lips.

"I'll offer more substantial proof," she said.

Marion walked back to the conservatory door and opened it. The sound of the talk and laughter of the women came through it and then ceased.

Marion with agitated heart but a face altogether calm and self-possessed looked within.

Her voice sounded. It was sweet, absolutely dulcet as she called.

What she said drew General Livingston, Morris, Bob Livingston, Stanton and Whitney into rigid attention and caused them a greater surprise than her sudden outburst of laughter uttered at Lynch's statement of the name of the woman who had been with her husband in the motor car.

Little Mrs. Stanton, called through the doorway:

"Elizabeth!"

The talk and laughter that had sounded in the next room was now entirely silenced, and in the silence was heard the rustle and swish of a skirt.

Astonishment came anew when the voice within called back in reply:

"Yes, Marion, dear!"

The tone was as dulcet as Marion's had been.

And it was the voice of Mrs. Blakemore.

"Come in," said Marion eagerly.

Mrs. Blakemore entered. She hesitated at the door. She was astonished as the men had been to hear Mrs. Stanton address her so familiarly, in such an excess of sweetness and friendliness. She did not understand the situation. Yet she was without choice in the matter just then. Having been addressed by her first name, courtesy but demanded that her return of the salutation should be the same. And so she had answered Marion in kind.

At sight of the stranger in the room, she halted. She was not above being fearful of

this new man. What did his presence mean? Of course, it could be none other than the reporter. And if that were true, what did Marion Stanton design — design to expose her there and then as being the woman of the automobile accident; to subject her before all, to the reporter's cross-examination.

Mrs. Blakemore tried very hard to dismiss this fear. She gave herself the assurance that as a guest in the Stanton home no such trap could possibly, would possibly be laid for her.

However, what was the scheme? Some plan existed; some reason there was for Mrs. Stanton's so suddenly assuming an intimate, almost sisterly affection for her.

Marion gave her little time to turn these things over in her mind, rapidly as the thoughts did come and go.

Young Mrs. Stanton was by Mrs. Blakemore's side almost instantly and to the further amazement of the lady she found the arm of Howard Stanton's wife affectionately and — uneasily, she understood, firmly slipping around her waist.

"Don't say a word, dear," said young Mrs. Stanton laughing anew. "The greatest joke you ever heard. Come."

Mrs. Blakemore surrendered in a walk across the room to where Mr. Lynch stood looking toward them with puzzled eyes. Indeed, since she was playing the part, Mrs. Blakemore decided to do her share, even if it killed her. She, in turn, slipped her arm about the waist of Mrs. Stanton. The pair moved most affectionately together if there was anything to be read in an attitude.

"Mr. Lynch, of the *City News*, may I present Mrs. Elizabeth Blakemore."

The astounded young reporter took a very firm grip on his hat. He braced himself visibly. He was utterly at a loss for a few seconds.

"Mrs.— Mrs. Blakemore!" he was finally able to stutter in a dumbfounded fashion.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Lynch," said the widow, readily and pleasantly.

Mr. Lynch was thrown too far out of his moorings to reply with ease or indeed, to reply at all to her greeting. He merely repeated the name.

"Mrs. Blakemore!" he said in a dazed way.

Marion glanced quickly at the man, fun in her eyes.

"And you see, Mr. Lynch," she remarked

gaily and with just a touch of the vindictive; "she's not lame a bit from her broken leg."

Lynch winced.

Mrs. Blakemore was feeling no more at ease than himself. She could not tolerate being further left in the dark and yet being asked to play the principal role in this scene.

"What's the joke?" she asked of Marion Stanton.

"Well," said Marion tauntingly, tantalizingly, "you would not expect, Mr. Lynch — now would you? — to find the plaintiff and correspondent so friendly?"

"Plaintiff — correspondent!" gasped Mrs. Blakemore. Her old fears came back to her. Marion Stanton meant to throw the laws of good breeding and hospitality to the winds — meant to let the pack of reporters in on her; meant probably to suddenly and fiercely push her from her side and melodramatically denounce her. She felt the arm of Marion Stanton tighten about her waist, as if she did not mean at this minute to give her a chance of getting away. She heard young Mrs. Stanton talking to her.

"Yes, dear," she was saying; "Mr. Lynch

came all the way up from down town to tell me that I was going to bring divorce suit against Howard — naming you as the correspondent. Now wasn't that sweet of him? I think it was delightful, don't you?"

"This is horrible — awful!"

A warning pressure came from Marion's arm.

"Now, dear," said the young wife, "don't lose your sense of humor."

Then she heard Marion say to the reporter:

"Now, are you satisfied, Mr. Lynch."

Mrs. Blakemore gave inward thanks. For some reason Marion's intention was far from being one of exposure; it was to shield her; to show herself with the woman in the case on such friendly terms that the voice of the press; the hue and cry of notoriety must be forever hushed.

It was wonderful — unreasonable almost that young Mrs. Stanton should do this — should want to do this, but Mrs. Blakemore was compelled to believe her own senses. There stood Marion with her arm about her, showing every indication in outward attitude of friendliness and affection and doing it evidently for the benefit of young Mr. Lynch or rather for the object of his complete befuddlement.

Lynch found amazement after amazement being piled upon him.

"Well," asked Marion again, "are you satisfied, Mr. Lynch?"

He hesitated. He slowly thrust his hand into the inside pocket of his coat.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Stanton," he said, "but you are so confoundly clever that you might — well, you might, run in a 'ringer,' you know."

Mr. Lynch's purpose for reaching into his inside pocket now became apparent. He produced a photograph. He took a long look at it. And then he took a long look at Mrs. Blakemore. And then he shook his head affirmatively.

"Guess you win, Mrs. Stanton," said Mr. Lynch of the *City News*.

"Thanks," said Marion lightly, satirically and recognized his confirmation with a small bow.

Lynch stood acutely regarding the two women. It was true that the woman of the automobile and the wife of the man of the automobile stood before him, arms around each other's waist, outwardly the greatest and best of friends, but Mr. Lynch's reportorial experience had trained him always to look down

beneath the surface of things. That there was a riddle here he was quite sure. But the solution of it was not at his hand. He cudgeled his brain fast and hard. He got no answer. But he had intuition and he looked squarely at little Mrs. Stanton and said:

"Yes — you must be right. I don't believe even you could put your arm *about the other woman.*"

He was not insensible to Marion's start nor to the gasp that came from the on-looking, overhearing men.

Yet Mr. Lynch was helpless to go further. Here were the two women and instead of being at daggers' points he found them embracing and smiling into each other's faces.

Mr. Lynch was forced to but one conclusion. The story might be there but even if it was, no newspaper could print it — would dare to print it. Clearly there was to be no divorce.

"Sorry to have disturbed you," said the representative of the press finally. "Good night."

"Good night," said Marion and, do what she would, she could not hide the relief she felt as she bade him farewell.

The next instant he was outside the door.

Mrs. Blakemore would have disengaged herself from Marion's embrace but Mrs. Stanton whispered swiftly and warningly:

"Wait — wait! Hold it! He came back last time." So they stood, posing expectantly and with the set smiles on their lips.

The door did open, slowly and softly.

Mr. Lynch entered.

His face fell when he observed the picture quite unchanged.

"Yes, indeed, quite the handsomest man I have seen in years," Marion said banteringly to Mrs. Blakemore, just as if she had not observed the entrance of the reporter.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Lynch.

"Did you forget your gloves, Mr. Lynch," Mrs. Stanton asked sweetly and therefore the more pointedly.

The reporter was all out of self-possession.

"Er — ah — I thought so — but I find I was mistaken. Good — good night."

"Good night," said both women to him.

CHAPTER XXXIV

"I GIVE HIM TO YOU"

THE instant that the two women were sure that the reporter was gone not to return, their instinctive dislike for each other became uppermost. There was a quick disengaging of the arms that they had held about each other's waists. There was a broad widening of the distance between them. The men and Mrs. Blakemore stood feeling the awkward pause keenly as Marion looked calmly at the woman who would have stolen from her the love of her husband.

But she did not let the pause become too keenly awkward. She smiled at Mrs. Blakemore the conventional smile of the conventional hostess.

General Livingston, however, was perhaps the most embarrassed of all present. This new order of doing things; this queer part that his daughter was playing was too much for his un-

derstanding. However, he no longer thought of Mrs. Blakemore as a charming woman. He saw only in her his daughter's enemy. He went over to his child and said quietly.

"Marion, I insist —"

But whatever he had intended to insist upon, he got no chance to speak. His daughter interrupted him.

"Father," she said hurriedly, "will you and the boys join the others. They are waiting, Mrs. Blakemore and I will come in a few minutes."

General Livingston did not like this ordering of things. He had opened his mouth to speak again when Marion said pleadingly:

"Please, father."

"Very well then," said the old man and followed by his son, Ned Morris and Oliver Whitney stalked out the room.

Stanton was left with his wife and Mrs. Blakemore. Again there came a pause. Stanton was not looking at the widow at all. He had eyes only for his wife. Mrs. Blakemore on the other hand, had no eyes for him either. She, too, was looking at Marion Stanton.

Mrs. Blakemore did not speak for several

seconds. She stood with bowed head, her eyes pensive, her lips twitching half-painfully. Finally she looked up.

"Mrs. Stanton," she said in her low, mellow voice; "I don't know how to thank you for what you have done for me."

Marion almost imperceptibly drew a little further away.

"You've quite disarmed me," continued Mrs. Blakemore. "You had it in your power to make a very ugly scandal and — and you saved me. I am powerless. Your generosity beats me."

And now Mrs. Blakemore saw for the first time openly the mettle of her rival's steel displayed.

"Did you think I did that for you?" demanded Marion. "Do you think I could have done it merely for you? Do you think I did that for you, Mrs. Blakemore?" she repeated. She vigorously shook her head.

"I did it, Mrs. Blakemore, for my husband; I did it for his honor; for his good name; for my own good name. I did it to save his mother the pain and despair of an ugly scandal; I did it to save my own parents from suffering!"

She whipped the other woman with the glances of her scornful eyes.

Then suddenly, she laughed and not pleasantly. "I did it," she said, "to give my husband a chance to realize his true position."

It was perhaps not all to Stanton's credit that he now seemed to forget utterly the presence of the widow, the fair object of his flirtation and cause of his faithlessness; that he knew and realized only one thing and that was that Marion was not lost to him. Her speech had indicated that. She had said practically that there was to be no divorce; she had talked of sparing his mother and her parents the scandal. Then it could not mean that she meant to divorce him and marry Whitney. His joy and exultation were stronger in him then than any conventional gallantry could hold down.

He strode to a place between the two women. He held out both his hands. And they were shaking with the earnestness of his declaration.

"I do love you Marion," he cried. "I do realize my position. I love you — I want you — you only — you always."

He could not perceive that Mrs. Blakemore drew back, uttering as she did so an exclamation

sharply, one seeming to couple surprise and dismay.

He turned toward her.

"Oh, my eyes are opened now," he assured the tall black-haired woman. "I've been a fool — a dazzled fool. But now I see clearly — you've done that."

"I?"

"Yes, you, Mrs. Blakemore."

"I — I do not understand."

"You have shown me what a splendid woman my wife is — you've done that — shown me what a splendid woman my wife is."

Mrs. Blakemore made a little gesture of impatience.

Stanton went toward his wife, his arms out. But she put up a hand to stop him.

"No," she said; "I'm through."

Marion waved a hand in the direction of Mrs. Blakemore.

"Take him," she said, "I give him to you."

The widow very decisively shook her head.

"Not for mine," she declared. "You'll get all that's coming to you after I'm gone. Good night my friend; a pleasant evening and good luck."

Elizabeth Blakemore thus sauvely smothered all the chagrin and anger that she must have felt as she went steadily and even with stateliness out of the apartment and left Stanton and his wife confronting each other.

Strangely enough they both stood for some time quite abashed. Now that it was all done, that Howard had in no unmistakeable terms, scornfully almost, dismissed her rival and was again a suitor at her feet, she felt strangely an accession of shyness, of indetermination. It came as a reaction of the nervous tension under which she had labored all night for the end she had in view; a reaction also of the week of desperate planning, of the tears of fear and smiles of resolution.

"Marion — Marion," he called to her, not yet quite sure that he might take her in his arms.

"Has she gone?" asked Marion suddenly; "quite gone?"

"Has who gone," asked Stanton. His eyes and his mind were only on one object in the room.

"Puss — has Puss gone?"

"MARION," HE SAID BROKENLY, "I'VE LOVED YOU ALL THE TIME" *Page 321*

"Oh, she's not my Puss," declared Stanton in impatient disgust.

"Not your Puss, Howard;" bantered Marion. "Then whose Puss is she?"

"God knows — maybe," replied Stanton hotly.

Impulsively he came over to her and caught her hands. The pressure he put upon them was so hard that it hurt her but she bore the pain almost ecstatically.

"Marion," he said brokenly, "I've loved you all the time — all the time. I've been a fool,— a weak, dazzled fool. I love you, Marion, I love you."

He paused. And when next his voice came it sounded with whispering softness and vibrant it was with pleading.

"Marion," he said, "won't you take me back?"

She put up her hand, pushing back gently the disordered hair on his troubled forehead.

"Take you back?" she asked. "Why I've never given you up. Do you think I could stand for that cat — Puss I mean — in this house and me — me — off for Reno?"

She felt then the pressure of Howard Stanton's youthful, sinewy arms harder than she had ever felt them before. And the kiss he put upon her lips told more keenly and surely in its intensity of the complete revival of his love than all words could have done.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE BACHELOR

UNGALLANT of Howard Stanton it may have been, and inhospitable too of both him and Marion — but so engrossed were they in the finding anew of their old love, so delighted in the realization that it had never been dead, but had only waned under unconscious neglect — that Mrs. Blakemore was left to make her exit quite unattended and, therefore, consciously awkward.

But as she arrived at the broad staircase in the hallway, on the way to the apartment where she would find a maid to help her with her wraps, she came upon Oliver Whitney.

He was sauntering in the big drawing-room and was quite alone. Bob Livingston had joined his pert little Salie, and Ned Morris was in dignified attendance upon his wife, Belle. General and Mrs. Livingston and Mrs. Stanton were eagerly discussing the opera on the program for the evening.

Whitney, the bachelor, finding himself alone, was glad of it. The events of the night had done much to bring back painful memories. Just as Marion and Howard had found that their love was not dead, he had found also that his love had only been dormant; that it refused to lie quiescent in a secret tomb of his heart; that its spectre rose and tortured him. The little moment, when by reason of Marion's strategy, he had been permitted to play lover, to hold her in his arms; had revived the dead past more strongly than he cared to own.

In slight degree a comparison might have been struck just then with Mrs. Blakemore and Whitney as they met in the broad hallway. Not that she had really loved Stanton; not that he had been any more to her than the regiment of others who had gone before. But just at this moment she was enduring defeat. And Whitney had endured defeat. Her defeat meant no disaster. His had meant the death of all opportunity ever in his life to know full happiness.

Whitney bowed and smiled when he saw her, secretly envying the nature that he knew would find ready consolation in the next man probably

that she met or, at any rate, in the next after that.

"Oliver," she said with a tone of familiarity that was also a memory to him, "I am going home. Will you be my escort?"

"But, Stanton?"

"Bother Stanton," she said.

He lifted his eyebrows.

"Howard is in with his wife. He'd rather stay there, I am sure," she said with an attempt at the jocular that only, however, succeeded in bringing a wry smile to her lips.

"Well, of course, I shall be delighted," said Whitney. "I'm always glad to play utility parts."

She frowned.

"O, you must not take that too seriously," said Oliver. "Of course, I shall be glad to be your escort to your home."

"For old time's sake?" said the widow softly.

Whitney bowed.

And when finally they were ensconced in Whitney's motor car and had ridden a long time in silence, the widow said:

"After all, Oliver, do you know that I never really liked any one so much as you."

"After all?"

She bit her lip.

"Yes," she said slowly, "that's what I mean. After all — after I think of all of those I have known, you are most genuine and the wisest."

"I?"

"Yes; you. The others I played with. But you, you I always knew only played with me — quite as I played with you. And if — if — perhaps you had not been so willing to regard it all as mere — mere play, why —"

"Why, then," laughed Oliver easily, "I'd have been like the others."

He handed her out at her apartment, pleasantly refusing an invitation to remain awhile and smoke a cigarette and take a cup of coffee; and having discharged his duty as escort ordered his car to go to the opera house, where he sat out an act in company with General Livingston, Mrs. Livingston and Mrs. Stanton.

Immediately afterwards he went home. His man was ready with his dressing-gown, his cigar and had the easy chair drawn before the fireplace.

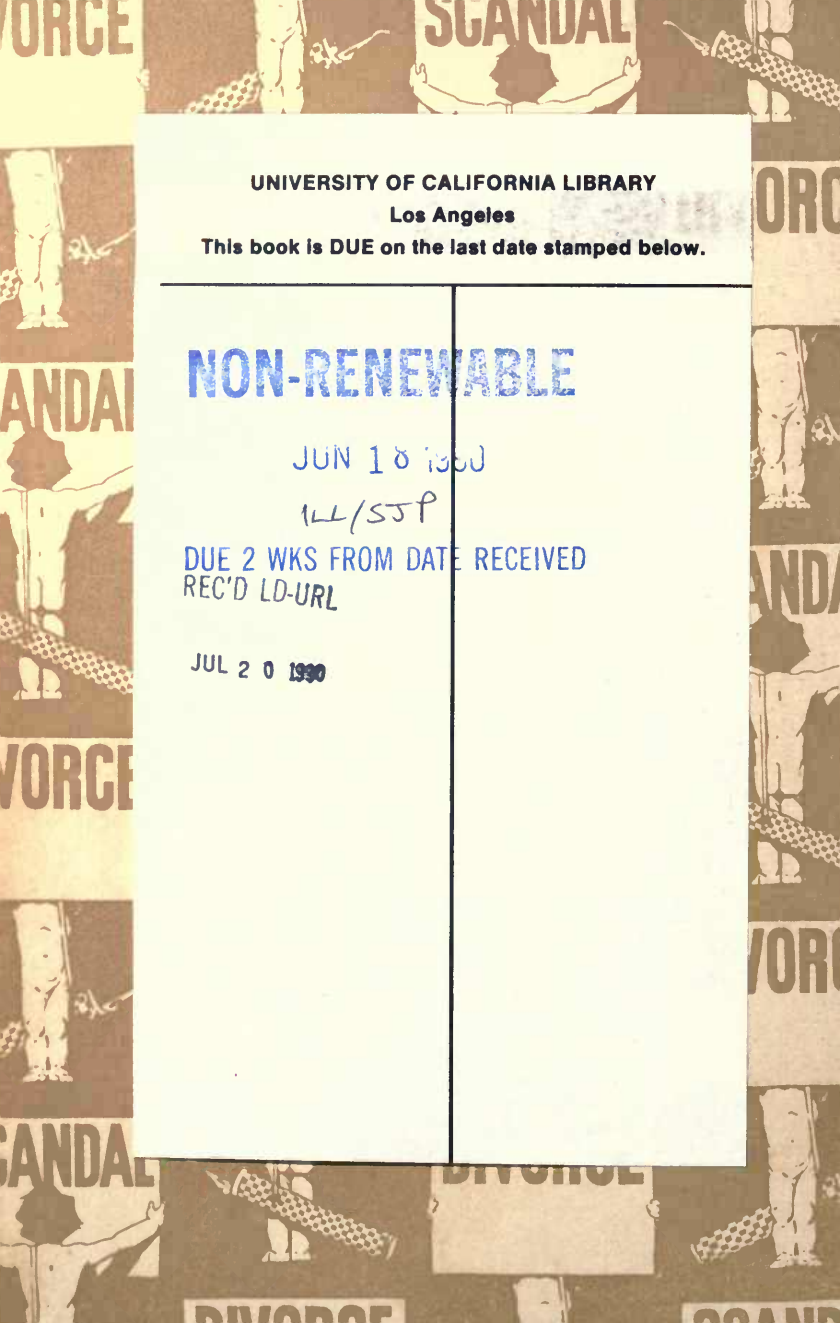
Seating himself, Whitney dismissed the valet. When the man was gone, he went to an old writ-

ing desk and out of it took a leather portfolio and out of this he drew five photographs. All were of Marion Stanton. They showed her from girlhood to that day when she donned her wedding gown.

One after the other he looked at them and then again and again he slowly passed them in review. He puffed slowly at his cigar until the heat of its consuming end grew hot on his fingers. He threw it away. But he went on sitting before the fire, the photographs in his hand. He no longer looked at them, but looked instead into the curling flames.

And so he sat till dawn.

THE END



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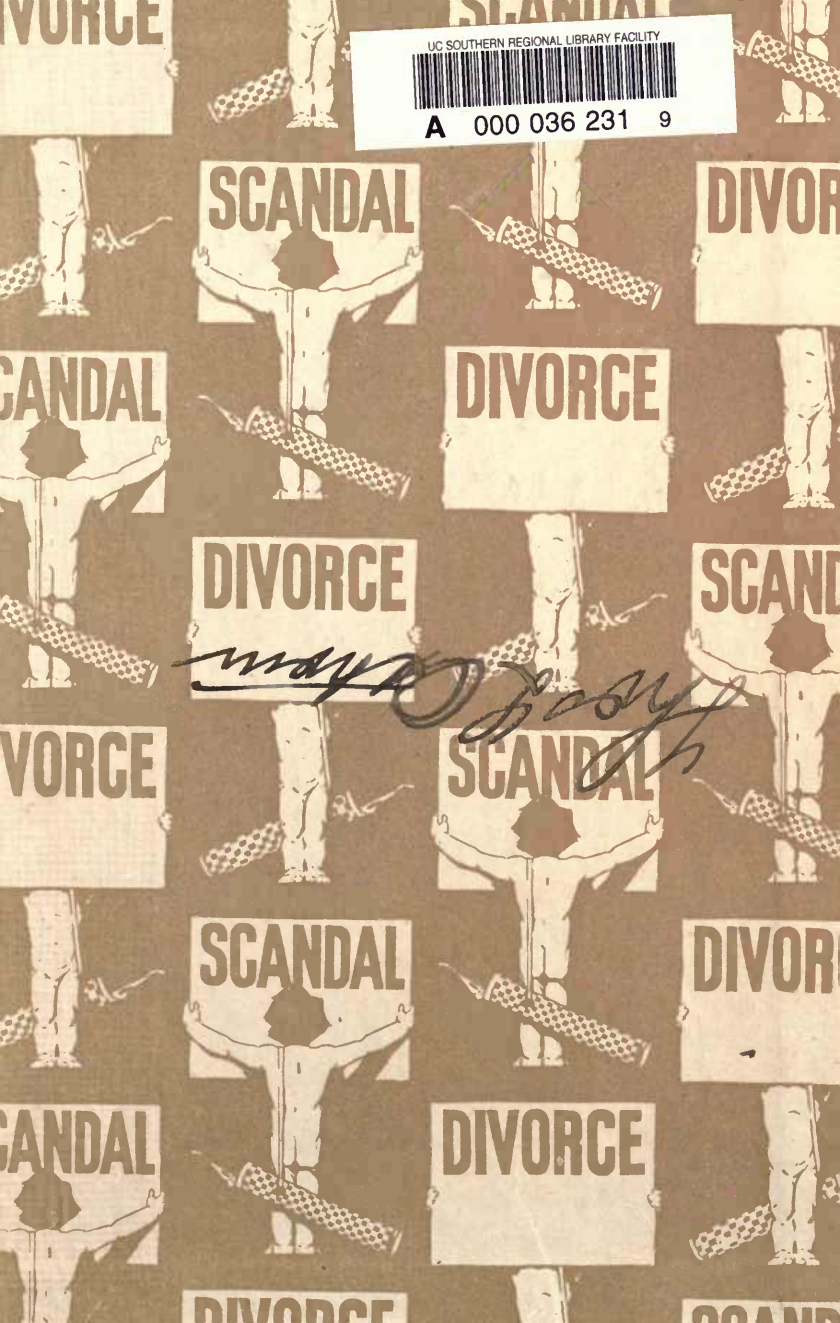

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